BRAZEN IMAGE

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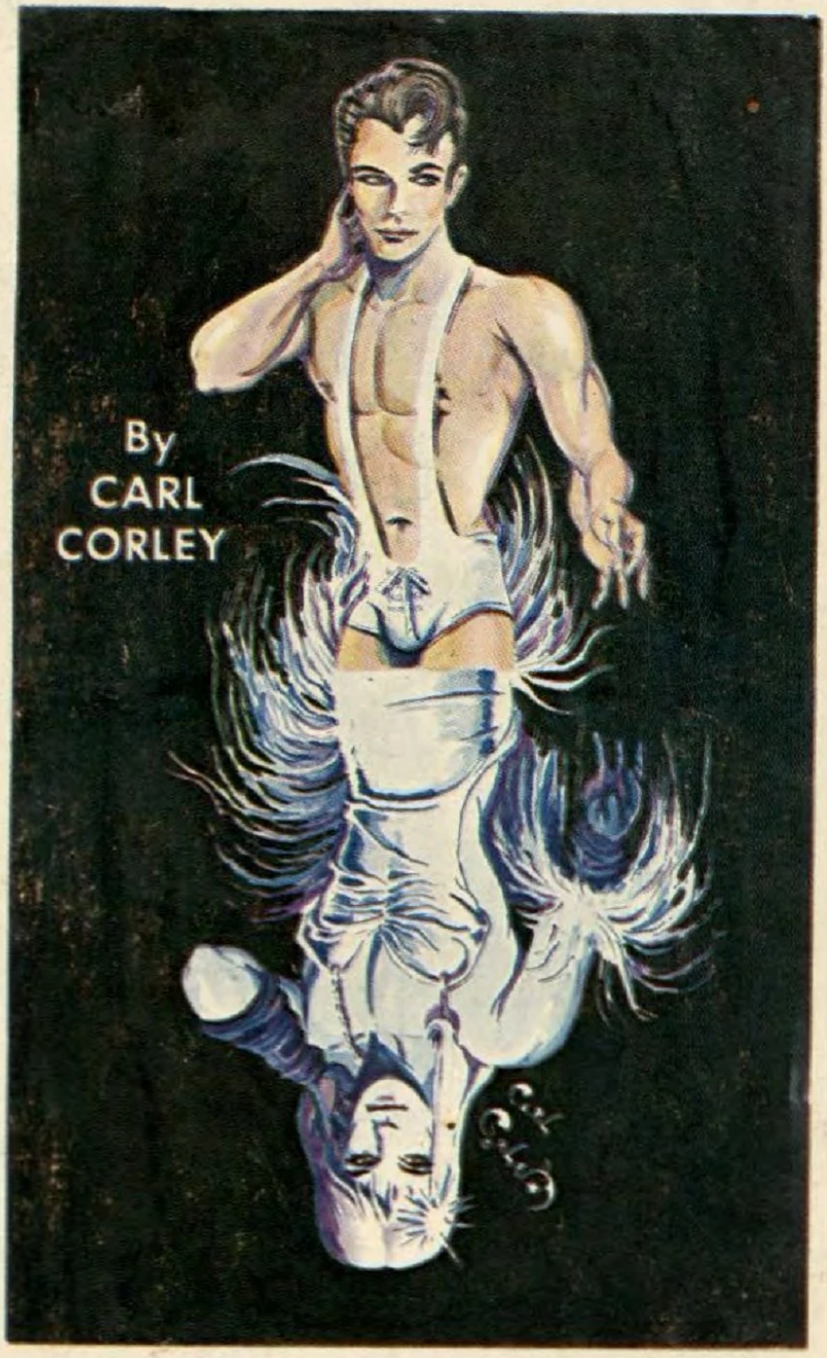

By
CARL
CORLEY

THE FINEST IN ADULT READING

I AM A STAR

. . . a male in the role of a female; and as that star, I have become, on the stage, the very essence of Woman. Not woman in the physical sense: bosomy, too loose hipped, with an obvious strut, too vampy. But woman ethereal . . . woman sublime . . . with her personality a mask that allows us to project our own feelings, desires, dreams and hungers upon her . . . like the mask of the ancient theatre.

This is an art, and I have mastered it, this playing the part of a woman in the body of a male. And that is all it has ever meant to me: a part on a stage, a part that dies the minute I walk off and into my own male world . . . until I am again in the arms of my lover.

BRAZEN IMAGE

by

Carl Corley

A P.E.C. FRENCH LINE NOVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

I wonder about men.

I will always wonder about them: their superficial anonymity, their unforeseen witchery, their beguiling compulsions, their animal violence.

And because I wonder about them, have wondered in fact since I was in high school, have bowed to all their enthusiasms . . . nearly all . . . I have firmly established that all men . . . that all males are endowed with a mysterious power of which the scientists of today are unaware. And they will remain unaware perhaps, until our computing machines can break man down into all his various categories and label them.

Until then, this extra power is as mysterious as the planets, the stars, the glorious wonders of the universe, yet as exact. It is an invisible and timely element which, like the elements of the universe, is balanced on the thinnest veneer of precision. And as long as it remains balanced, man remains man. One ounce of ballast shifting from one pole to the other in man's fractual nerve-drome and his emotions go rampant. Then, this extra sense, keyed to fever pitch, sets into motion every nerve in his system and he commits paradoxical acts, usually for carnal reasons.

I call this sense . . . coercion.

The sense of compelling. The sense, through some mysterious inner faculty of his own, of persuading others to fall in with the wild and fantastic rhythm of his body, complying to do whatever his body wills. A kind of false-hypnotism, a trance out of trance, the same kind of coercion as when you place a chicken's beak to the ground and from his beak draw a straight line with chalk. It will remain enhanced, unmoved, until the chalk has been erased. Or like Don Juan, who kept his silk handkerchief tucked under his arm pit and, when taking it out and wiping the face of his paramour, he could always immediately seduce her. Or like the farmer who could entice his breeding stallion to get an erection by urinating in his presence. Or the man who could make it with young boys, I remember, by displaying his pubic hair. All these casual maneuvers, though of a physical structure, are the essense of man's power in the senses of coercion. There are mental powers also which are as strong, if not stronger, than those of the physical; a coupling of the spirits which is more paphian than the coupling of the body.

The sense of coercion in my best friend, Augie, with whom much of this story is concerned, awakened my mind to this dazzling quality in the male, shellacked over with the clever guises of companionship, courtship, daring, pure lust, and too . . . awakened within me an embarrassing, yet tantalizing realization, the disturbance of my own sex in relation to other males.

Augie touched but briefly this dormant but flagrant runaway within my young body, turned it into something wild and free and demanding, unshackling it from all my convictions, the mental laws which had bound it as a prisoner . . . a prisoner awaiting my decision to plot its death, or pardon it forever.

I pardoned it one fall day when the sycamore trees on the school campus carpeted the moss colored lawn to the gaudy hue of gold, and the sky was as white and shining clear as air.

Augie was late for football practice, having to remain to go through a number of relays in preparation for the homecoming game that following Thanksgiving weekend, so I hurried to meet him in the showers. I went out for track, for I was altogether too small, too feather-weight for the robust requirements for football, but he had always been partial to me, rather than his team-mate friends, and our friendship suited me immensely. Alone in a house with my mother, an elderly aunt, two sisters, Augie was indeed essential company, and I looked up to him to a degree, considered him older, more mature, wiser in a sense than other boys his or my age.

He was not an imposingly handsome boy, but he was dark and hard and rugged . . . a ruggedness which frightened me a little, for I could never read the changing light in his dancing eyes, never knew what to expect by his lazy smile, never quite understood his drowsy voice, his lanquid grace which could spring into the most violent of tempers at the slightest provocation: but thereby lay the reason for my great liking for him. He was as mysterious as a door with neither lock nor key, and equally as fascinating. And his sense of protection for me, because I was so small I was certain, a little over five feet, and like to stay by myself, drew me into his protection like a baby chick under its mother's wing.

Even though he possessed a hair-trigger temper, drove a motorcycle like a bat-out of hell, picked fights to show off his muscles, his strength, and fondled the girls a little more than necessary, he could do no wrong in my eyes.

He was the mythological hero in my youth, the knight on the white horse of dreams, the hazy god on marble. I was the hero worshipper, the romantic dreamer, the over-dramatic puppet fumbling on the stage of life; and since that day he had moved into Vicksburg from Louisiana, and had come up the drive to our house on the hill to visit me, I was in love with him: the image he instilled in my innocent boy's heart, the fixation I was to take with me to my grave. And I fought that love, that deep admiration I had for him, as bitterly, as savagely as if he were a wild animal after my life.

So that day, running through the tossed golden leaves, breathing deeply into my excited lungs the fresh fall air, hurrying to the shower stalls to remind him that he had promised to take me to the Warren county fair, I was bubbling with ecstasy, my heart pounding with the urge to hurry . . . hurry . . . hurry! But as I reached the little corrugated tin building which was set a great distance from the school building itself, half hidden in a clump of live oaks ghostly with streamers of moss, I slowed my pace, and I was so nervous my legs wobbled faintly . . . awed to a sick sweetness over being with him in the showers . . . perhaps alone . . . of seeing his body, a desire I long had harbored in my mind, but never dared to ask myself why. Oddly, on reaching the door leading into the showers, I paused, drawing the wintry air into my tortured lungs and, for a quiet moment, I leaned against the tin wall and saw in a glorious vision that time he had come to the house one evening after school, and that same faint feeling I had, that lump in the pit of my stomach that I felt now.

I had been on the front porch waiting for him, and he had ridden up the drive on his gigantic black motorcycle, like a charger in days of old, dressed in hip-hugging jeans, with a black leather jacket with silver epaulettes setting his black, curly hair off to masculine perfection. Even now, this minute, I could recall each detail of his dress, how brightly his riding boots shone, how his hard muscles had bulged through his jeans, his long lazy strides, his dutch boy cap which was instantly in his hand when he saw my aunt and me, how bright his dancing eyes lazily dreamed in their pools of dark light, how he had smiled one of his devilish, maddening smiles.

Now, I hoped, I dared to catch him disrobed, unhusked, like corn when the dry farms are stripped back and the smooth, clean corn shines radiantly in the sun.

I caught at myself. I was a boy! I was a young grown man! Why should I be thinking such things?

Timidly I opened the wooden paneled door and went in. He's got to be alone! He's got to be alone! my soul cried, as I made my way through the dressing room and into the tin partitioned shower stalls. There was the sound of trickling water, and my heart skipped a beat as I waded across the water soaked floor, peering into stall after stall. They were empty, and I sank into a welter of disappointment. Then I saw him at the far end, and I rushed to where he was, my every nerve playing me tricks as I gazed at him maddenly as he bent and soaked his naked legs with soap, his hair down over his eyes, unaware that I was near. I went up to him. Then he rose, and on seeing me, he flashed a broad grin, but he was unconscious of his nakedness, as naive as a babe.

"Well, it's you, Smash," he said, still grinning, calling me as always by that endearment rather than by my own name, Dewy. "Bout ready to get with the cotton candy and the freak zoo shows?"

"Ready when you're ready," I managed to answer as I halted in my tracks, my eager eyes going hungrily over his naked body. He was so dark, so utterly dark, almost savage there trapped in the light of the little window, his slick skin advertising the ripple of his every muscle, the coiling veins that race along his forearms, his thighs at his every move. My eyes dragged down the length of him, etching with my memory the way the coarse dark hair curled in wild black streams down the center of his chest, his navel, and into a dark, mysterious nest at his crotch, and to his elongated organ which hung like an antler, and to his seeds which shone like gourds in a sack of plastic skin. The mere sight of him touched something primeval in my own loins, and I loathed myself for trembling so, my teeth rattling like the loosened teeth in a skull.

"Hand me that grubby towel, Smashy boy," he said, pointing to the towel hanging from the opposite wall. "And your old Augie will be turned on before you can say count down, and we'll be off to that human zoo!"

I took the towel and, as I stepped over a puddle of water to reach him, he suddenly swept me into his arms, my own small body being soaked up in the soapy wettness of his enormous thighs, his broad chest, his powerful, entangling arms.

Before I realized what was taking place, he kissed me squarely on the lips, bent back my head, his tongue sliding down my neck. I all but fainted, but instinctively I tried to push him off, to wiggle out of his grasp which had me locked within like a vise.

"Been aching to do that a long time, Smash," he murmured, his lips just above mine, threatening, conquering. "I want you, Smash, gotta have you . . . understand!"

"What?" I cried, too stunned to move, yet instinctively galvanized into moving. I wanted him to touch me, yet loathed the idea, the idea of what it represented applied to myself. But I almost melted within his grasp, yielding to something invincible, something magnetic and thrilling and provocative, some inner mysterious something about him I feared I could not overcome.

"Just you and me, Dewy," he said, gripping my body so tightly I could barely breathe. "I'll thrill you, Smash." Then he muttered very low, hoarsely, almost animal-like. "The way you were born to be thrilled."

Though I liked him immensely, considered him to be the most wonderful friend I had ever met, these new emotions, demands stirring within him sent wild terrors through me, racing my blood. And at the same instant I realized he was not joking with me, not playing some ill-starred game, but that he was dead serious; and trying to wiggle from his grasp I realized that he had an erection, its enormous proportions all but making me faint, and fear and visions of pain screamed through me like electrical currents. His emotions, his desire now were so strong the very essence of him tore away my defenses like fangs through gauze, breaking me into a million pieces of tiny weaknesses, tapping every fiber of my strength, disassembling my will.

His hands groped, slid down to my hips, to my groin. A sudden wild thrill went through me. For a nervous, frightful instant, I surrendered and, as his hand wandered lovingly, his hot mouth found mine. I was truly frightened now and, shoving him away with all my strength, I broke his grip, his flow of passion from his body to mine, his wild impulse which was even stronger than mine.

"No! Augie!" I half screamed, frightened out of my wits. And I darted out of the shower as quickly as my legs would take me, my last glimpse of his shocked, surprised face one of complete bewilderment, but mingled with that bewilderment the beligerent gaze of devilry.

The next day he acted as though nothing had happened.

But I was greatly affected. He had tapped something in my life, my young being, had awakened within me this strange fantastic madness, and a voice in the back of my brain told me profoundly, yet frighteningly, that this was only the beginning of a pursuant something which was to alter and re-shape my life.

I did not like to think I was queer. That word was applied to other people, other effeminate boys at school, on the streets, at the corner drugstore and movie houses, and much older men who walked fuzzy poodles and eyed you with a fixed gaze. Yet, I harbored visions of Augie, deep secret visions locked in the darkness of my thoughts. And when they came to mind I instinctively tried to push them back into their vault of darkness, to forget them.

But Augie would not let me forget.

He was possessed of this strange, wild power. It was in his blood, his being, roamed inside him like a beautiful wild thing, shone in his eyes, vibrated in his deeply Southern voice, radiated in his physical self.

Since I did not become angry with him about the unexpected event in the showers, he began to court me incessantly. He was forever teasing me, pinching me on the behind, trying to lure me into dark corners, saying boldly what he would like to do to me, thrilling me yet terrifying me. Secretly, and oh, how secretly, I longed in a fashioning of my own that he do with me all the things he so boldly imposed on me with words, but this odd terror I had of him, this fathomless gauge of him in this surprising role kept me in a constant maneuver to put him off, to assure myself I could always manage to stay a few paces ahead of his schemes, his physical advances. Not that I did not get any enjoyment out of his pursuits. I did. I basked in them. I took them to bed with me at night, nursed them, reheard through the memory of my mind everything he had said to me that day. And I hated myself for this, hated that I wanted him to do such things to me, hated my own weakness, my own impulsiveness to let his dominant attractiveness shape me so thoroughly.

And he shaped me as thoroughly as though he were a potter and I his potter's clay. His Creole darkness, his savagely black hair, his snapping eyes, his bold, physical manner, his constant teasing, flirting, were the strong fingers of his will which bent to the soft clay of my being, shaping me into the thing he wanted, making me into the dark animal object of his love, his carnal desires.

Love is like water in a cup, my aunt always declared. It shapes itself to the vessel that contains it.

I became Augie's love, his deep, personal belonging, and that brooding, determined love shaped me to fit his needs. I became his in time . . . it took a very *long* time . . . through no deliberate will of my own: a possession, a fillup to his sexual appetite, the lodestone of his young, wayward heart.

No man ever pursued a woman with the untiring determination of Augie in his wild pursuit of my body, my heart. And no woman was ever more fulfilled.

But, as stirring as are my remembrances of him, his love, his wants, I am getting ahead of my story . . . the story that must be told, I feel, for it is a strange story, the story of the transmigration of the two sexes throughout one physical body.

CHAPTER TWO

I was listed in my aunt's family bible as Dewy Edward Bow. When I finished high school I was only five feet tall, a contemporary trait in Southern males, especially those of French and Creole descent. My hair was black, Indian straight, which I kept rather long, coming to a sharp U at the nape of my neck and parted down the side which left the front locks full swing to drape themselves over my brow. My eyes were ice blue, too blue for one as dark as I, as if my creator had run out of pigment and had to settle for what he had. But I liked my eyes, for they were framed with black curling lashes and winged with curving, graceful brows. The features of my face were finely chiseled, sharp and keen of nose, high of cheek-bone, and clean cut of lip; the kind of face you see in those ads in male magazines advertising swim trunks, jockey straps, and posing wear: a little too ideal for ruggedness, but nevertheless masculine. My skin was dark, lava colored, the color of a snuff buttle, my aunt remarked, and stretched over my muscles and bone as tightly as skin over a drum. There was no body hair, none on my arms and legs and chest, and once a week I kept it shaved clean from my chin and neck. I was naturally hard and wiry, vitally alive with good health and energy, and because of my animal alertness, my vivid curiosity about all things, I made and kept friends easily.

Yet, caught up in my world of dreams, my overwhelming desire to create roles, people, characters other than myself, I often had the impulsive desperation to get away, alone, to break away from all the human beings who surrounded my daily existence, and to find an alcove where I could dream my fanciful theatrical dreams.

I found that retreat high up on top of Fort Hill observation tower, a spiraling staircase crowned with such a breathtaking view I could observe the entire Civil War battlefield . . . 1,300 acres of the best kept and best marked historical battlefield in the world, the Mississippi river winding over two hundred feet below, and the misty green hemispheres toward the West, toward Dallas and El Paso and California and . . . Hollywood!

Getting this longing, I would run up Fort Hill, climb those steep steps to the very top. There against the wide blue sky, feeling so fresh, so clean, I would stare into the distance, dream, create my make-believe people: people like myself, though I did not know that then.

I would come to know in good time those shadowy beings, fascinating, mysterious, repulsive, ridiculous! But then I was young and clean and pure, and happy most of the time; happy because I had no one to answer to except myself. My two sisters, Violet and Laurel, older and high school graduates, maintained a world all their own, from which I was excluded. They worked in a dress shop on the bluff, and their taste was all in their mouths, for they couldn't match silk to lace. They brought home numerous dresses from the shop which I could have worn with far less self-consciousness. Not that my sisters were so drab; they merely did not know one style from another and, like most women, they accepted the clothes on the racks, never venturing to alter here, add there, and illuminate this or that, even if they would have enjoyed the consequences. They bought what was available, wore it, and were satisfied. I was always making criticisms, remarking how tacky they looked, and would have added my inspirations if I hadn't been afraid they would call me a sissy. And I loathed the word, for it brought sharply to mind a boy in my senior class named Cecil Little, who was fat, girlish, and followed the boys to the toilet in the basement.

My Aunt Nanny Jackson, who had lived with us for as long as I can remember, was not a hindrance either, though she was bloated with wise philosophy, cliches, and verbal remedies for what ails the mind. She had a word or phrase for everything, good or bad, happiness or unhappiness, and she gave good advice. She had been around for eighty years and there wasn't much she didn't know about Vicksburg or the south. She was a dyed-in-the-wool Southerner. All you had to do to get her foaming at the mouth was to say 'Damn Yankee.' Then you'd have to pour a bucket of water on her to cool her off. But I liked Aunt Nanny, she liked me, and I learned much from her. She had one pet phrase for me:

"Dewy, if you live to be a hundred, you still won't have time to do everything you want."

Which was the truth. I wanted to do everything!

She had another, which I was not certain I entirely liked:

"You are the mythological hero, Dewy, the hero who aspires to be absolute, but will never realize this absolute in a woman's world. You will always look for the sister-madonna face."

We shared long conversations together, seated out on the front porch of our house which perched high up on a bluff overlooking Highway Sixty-one and the Mississippi River. Some were good, some were bad, but they were all informative. Talking to my Aunt Nanny was like reading a book. Everyone of them has something to tell you you've never heard before. And I loved books, the printed word, and the movies. I harbored a passion for both.

She and I shared these wonderful mediums, exchanging books we thought the other would like, and attending movies together. Like me, she knew most of the Hollywood stars: who had married whom, who had divorced, and who had died. In a sense, she was like a movie star to me, one of the silent screen stars, one of those out of reach, like Garbo or Natacha Rambova or Marion Davies. She was strange, mysterious, and possessed of great

great world knowledge, though she had traveled very little, had created nothing, had performed no great civic work, had never acted, or written, or painted. Yet, she was an artist, the true artist, for she genuinely believed in and loved people . . . the major essence of art itself.

To me she was a very great lady . . . calm, courageous, patient, never imposing on my two sisters or me, never employing us from our own private worlds to engage in hers. She was tolerant to a fault, depriving herself that others might share, and the wisdom she passed on to me, especially about people and life, became a great asset to me during the years to follow. In other words, she broadened my mind, and prepared the way for me in the life I was to lead, forearmed me for the people I would come to know.

My mother was another affair.

She was not a selfish woman by nature; she would give you anything she had if you asked for it. But her only factual thoughts were for her own happiness . . . or unhappiness, which was more often the case. She was a deeply unhappy woman, and every man she met became a part of her great eternal pursuit toward completeness. During my childhood years and my adolescent reign in high school, she had many, many suitors; but never any of them for long. She had a great personality, but one which flagged at the least provocation, and turned to apathy and reproachfulness before anyone had time enough to know her. She was a good looking woman, always dressed well and in style, neat to fastidiousness. Smart was the word for her. Of the lingo of men, of bars, of lounges and roadhouses she was a master; but as for literature, she didn't know Hedda Gabler from Scarlett O'Hara; now, in art, a Rubens from a Renoir. But she could, without batting an eye, name every brand of beer and whiskey, every make of cigarette; and knew by heart the notorious sections of every major city in America. Her bedside reading was "True Romances" and "Love Stories," and her concession to the theatre consisted solely of accompanying my sisters and me aboard the "Sprague," the world's largest sternwheeler, to see the repetitious play, "Gold in the Hills." This was her one classical breach with the gutter, and only because she had had a minor part in it when a young girl.

"She's my only daughter," my grandmother said of her. "But Dela is cheap. And I detest such dull, unintelligent women."

Aunt Nanny an even more degrading opinion:

"Dela is many things to many men, but there is one thing she has in common with them all. She isn't a lady. She never was, even before Wayne left her."

I looked at her in mock surprise.

"But . . . but I thought Mama left Daddy?"

She turned on me a bright, eagle stare.

"Dewy, where're your observation powers? She almost ran away with one man once, a dashing ranch owner from Texas; but Wayne pulled her off the train just before she was leaving and brought her home." She sighed, not from my mother's vamp charades but from the weariness of many years. "Nothing went right after that. So, when the C.C.C.'s camped in the battlefield park long enough to clean it up and erect more statues, he joined and left with them. He never came back. No man, not God himself, could stay with your mother. She never loved but one man, that Texan, so she will never be satisfied by any." She looked at me, a long, gauging look. "You're like her, Dewy, much to my sorrow. For you're a wild goose on the wing, a wanderer, and you'll flee the coop someday."

I knew instinctively that she was right. The urge to flee was in me, the desperation to break out of the stall, the close quarters of my environment. Something of the rebel was in my blood. Though I oved Vicksburg, and knew like a gutter mouse its every nook and cranny, and practically all its inhabitant souls, I possessed at times the urge to exodus . . . to go somewhere, anywhere. New horizons, new faces, events which were alien beckoned o me, like Ulyssēs' Sirens luring the sailors. Urges yet unborn slept in my small body, to awaken at any econd, to come alive when that certain note was played. turning away all my precautions, tuning me o that exotic world. That world of dreams.

* * *

It was the summer after high school graduation, hat beautiful, restless time when youth searches or itself, and with groping fingers tries to mold omething out of life. We had the whole summer to urselves, Augie and men, and we were together constantly. The incident in the shower was behind us, and hadn't been repeated, and in the exhiliration of youth and summer I had almost forgotten it.

But Augie had not.

We had lugged Augie's motorcycle over a long sandhill, coming in from Tallula, and were getting ready to take a swim in the Mississippi to cool off. It was late in the evening, dusk, but the air was still hot and sticky. As I was peeling off my jeans Augie said cocky-like:

"You sure got a cute ass, Dewy!"

"What gives?!" I rasped, and I could feel the blushing heat spreading over me.

"Ah . . . I mean the cornholing kind," he came back, lying back on the sand bar and surveying me with bold, black eyes. His hands were behind his head and his damp hair, in long individual strands, fell recklessly over his brow. His legs were spread playfully, and I couldn't help but notice the enormity of his organ in its nest of wiry black hair. The sight of it set my pulses to pounding, and I suddenly became angry with him for starting up these feelings in me.

"Nobody's ever going to cornhole me," I answered hotly, emphasizing my words.

"Hope not," he said, this time with a seriousness bordering on the defensive. "The day you turn fruity is the day I whip your ass, and we quit being friends."

Turning, I saw a sheepish expression go over his face, and there was a hurt, thwarted anger in his dark eyes.

"What makes you think I ever would," I asked threateningly, not wanting to admit to myself my most secret thoughts. His eyes sparkled dangerously, and their gaze was suddenly terrifying to me. I slipped up my jeans and fastened the snap protectively.

"Leave em off, Dewy," he suggested, waving a hand. "Come lie down."

"Nothing doing," I protested, remaining standing, my hands on both hips. "What's got into you, Augie?"

"Horny . . . I guess," he answered, scratching. "Ain't had none since Belinda . . . remember? And that wasn't the best I ever had, not by a long shot. I've had better looking, many times . . . but damn! I've had worse!"

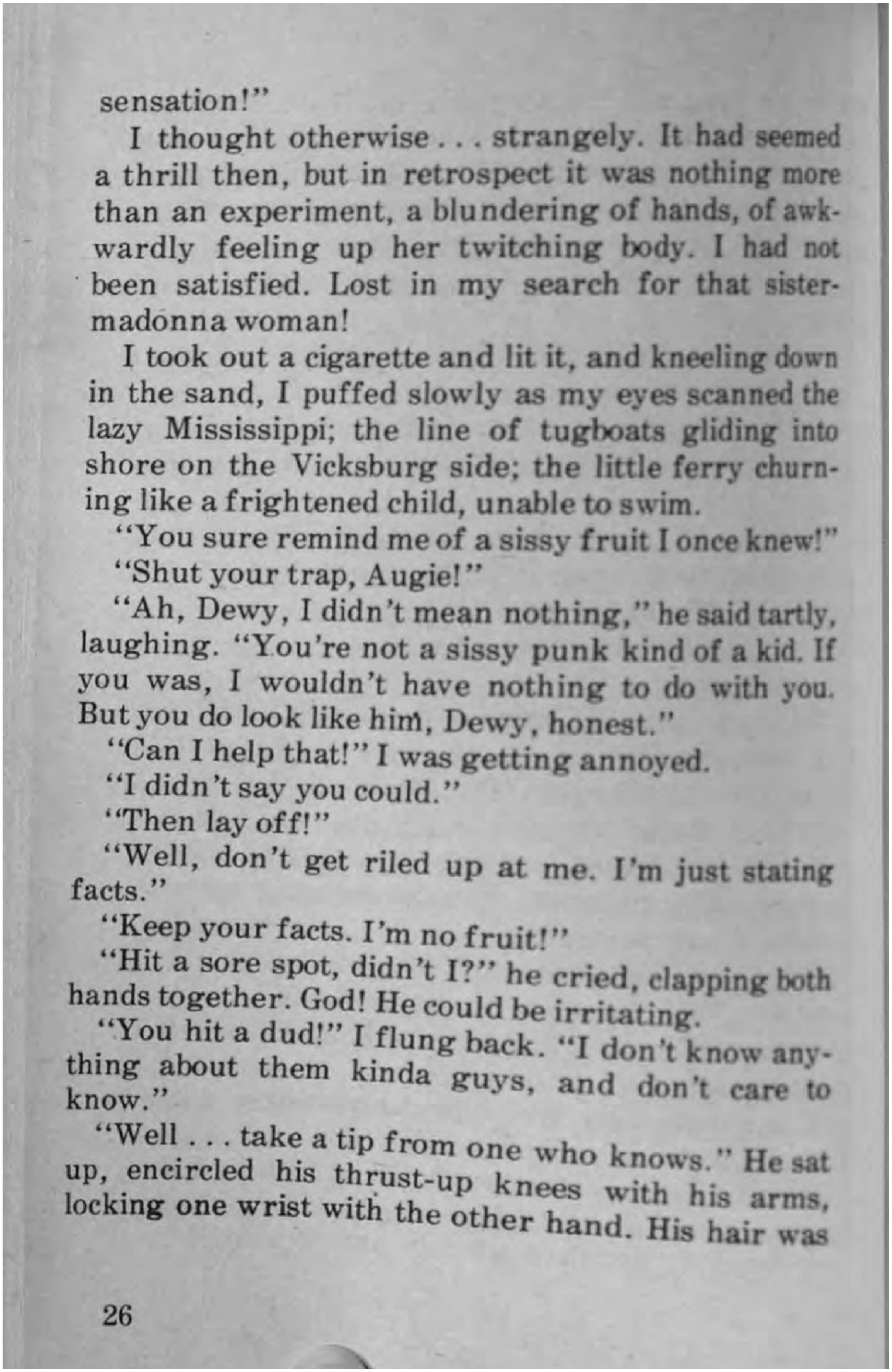
"We both have," I muttered, recalling the little dark haired grammar school girl I had taken first, hiding with her beneath the Missouri Memorial in Battlefield Park, in the downpour of rain, the whelping, icy drops freezing my naked behind. I laughed softly, amused by the memory of it . . . fresh, as if only yesterday.

"What you laughing at?" Augie cried, squinting at the sun. "Me . . . cause I got a hard on?"

"Hell no! I've seen 'em before. Thinking about my first piece."

He laughed with me, our rakish voices echoing through the dense wall of woods.

"Wow! I'll never forget that!" he bellowed, kicking up one leg, sand flying. "It was like a drove of partridges flying through my ass. Whee! What a



sensation!"

I thought otherwise . . . strangely. It had seemed a thrill then, but in retrospect it was nothing more than an experiment, a blundering of hands, of awkwardly feeling up her twitching body. I had not been satisfied. Lost in my search for that sister-madonna woman!

I took out a cigarette and lit it, and kneeling down in the sand, I puffed slowly as my eyes scanned the lazy Mississippi; the line of tugboats gliding into shore on the Vicksburg side; the little ferry churning like a frightened child, unable to swim.

"You sure remind me of a sissy fruit I once knew!"

"Shut your trap, Augie!"

"Ah, Dewy, I didn't mean nothing," he said tartly, laughing. "You're not a sissy punk kind of a kid. If you was, I wouldn't have nothing to do with you. But you do look like him, Dewy, honest."

"Can I help that!" I was getting annoyed.

"I didn't say you could."

"Then lay off!"

"Well, don't get riled up at me. I'm just stating facts."

"Keep your facts. I'm no fruit!"

"Hit a sore spot, didn't I?" he cried, clapping both hands together. God! He could be irritating.

"You hit a dud!" I flung back. "I don't know anything about them kinda guys, and don't care to know."

"Well . . . take a tip from one who knows." He sat up, encircled his thrust-up knees with his arms, locking one wrist with the other hand. His hair was still in his eyes, and he peered at me like a fugitive looking through a covey of grass. "Sickest mob I've ever seen. You oughta go to the Bon-Bon in Bossier City sometimes. They're working like flies. Hair all dyed, eyes painted like whores, wiggling their ass in front of all the kids. Damn! What a set up!"

I glanced at him momentarily, seeing this new . . . altogether new . . . something about him. A side he had never shown. And he seemed now, with his naked legs thrust up, causing his organ to thrust out more prominently, like a carving on a wall, protruding out over the edge . . . and I laughed. He looked like a stone-hard gargoyle, I thought, defying rain and storms and cyclones and . . . the brutality of life. And with the curiousness of him sitting in front of me in the sand naked; and his theme of conversation, more curious still, I posed a question.

"Augie . . . have you ever . . . ever gone with fruits?"

He immediately turned up his nose, twisted down his lower lip, and frowned, his face a puzzling mask under his canopy of wet hair.

"Ah, I've been gobbled a few times, if that's what you mean." He looked away, avoiding my gaze. "What the hell . . . I'm no Dorf! I get around. They can turn you on, especially them old ones. They buy you drinks and treat you like a smash. Any boy's a liar if he says he don't enjoy it. Hell, man! A hot mouth swinging on your hook . . . what the hell, man!"

I saw that he was ill at ease, confessing something he figured I regarded as repulsive, something gross.

"Why do you let them?"

"Cabbage, man, lettuce!" he answered, rubbing fingers together greedily. "What puts juice in my wheels, Dewy? Them old fruits! Hell, man. I don't live in a tree! They always bug out . . . when they've got your honey. Don't bother you none till they get hot for you again. So, baby, what's the harm?"

I glared at him; a long, unruly look.

"I just thought you were different, that's all," I muttered, saddened a little that I had come face to face with the baser, or what I considered, the baser facts of life. I liked him, looked up to him a little, and was somewhat shocked that he was revealing to me inner workings of himself I knew nothing of . . . and for what reason, for what useful purpose?

I puffed at my cigarette, studying quietly. "Why are you telling me all this, Augie?" I asked finally.

"Why?" he said gruffly. "Is it blowing your cool?"

"No . . . I just can't help but wonder."

"Burned?"

"Hell no! What made you tell me . . . now?"

He shrugged, lying back down on the sand, his hands behind his head. He crossed his legs, and his organ wobbled in the air, like a cobra charmed by his master's flute.

"Your naked ass a moment ago," he answered, softly, almost in a whisper. "Got the strange idea all of a sudden that you were a gut course. Got my ugly stick all aped up. What the hell, Dewy. Nobody'll ever find out. Nobody. It's a Mickey Mouse thing. Everybody's doing it now, and that's straight skinny. We get our balls popped, and nobody is the wiser."

My blood boiled. "Thanks . . . but no thanks! Nobody . . . no man is ever going to . . . er . . . do anything to me . . . ever!"

"Man . . . but your turning out to be a goose . . . a regular bird-dog. I'll dirty stick you one time, then I'll flame out. I'll get you all turned on, even lay a palm on it a few times."

"Go to hell, Augie!"

"You can even borrow my wheels."

"Augie . . . go to hell!"

"Man, but you're a loser!"

"No . . . I'm just a man."

"Ah, come on!" he said, trying to beguile me, patting a place on the sand. "Pull off your grubs."

I got up, brushing the sand off my jeans. "I'm going home."

"And I thought you were a closet case . . . my own closet case," he said, irritated. He leaped up from the sand and brushed back his long black hair. "But you're a real door-dodger, Dewy. I punt."

He went over to his motorcycle, flipped his clothes off the bars and jerked them on. "I'm a mover, man, been waiting on you for months, waiting for you to cut your E.B. off from Mother. So let's flake out!"

I flipped my cigarette butt into the river and climbed onto the buddy seat. I trembled a little, for I sensed his anger, and I didn't really know what to do or say.

"Slide up front, Smash," he suggested, tilting his leather cap to a swaggering angle on his touseled head. "Let you trigger the juice for a change, get the feel. I'll ride the buddy, and give you a shot down."

I slipped over the seat and started the motor. He straddled behind me, his muscular legs pressing against my behind warmly. I let out the throttle. We plowed through the sand, up the witch's hair incline to the highway and the river bridge. We jumped as if an springs.

"Stay loose, kid, stay loose," Augie bellowed behind me. The thrust all but knocked him backwards and he grabbed me around the waist. We gained the bridge, bumped over the rough flooring, the steel girders below creaking, groaning, the cables vibrating. His arms remained, slid down when he thought I was too preoccupied with the driving to notice, cupped my crotch.

"Bug out!" I yelled back to him, turning my head momentarily.

"You're a real door-hugger, Dewy boy!" he screamed into my ear, his cry drowned out in the vast hum of the motor.

I gave the motor all the juice it could take. We zoomed over the high bridge, hell bent for leather. Augie held on for dear life. We scooted up the hill, north, blazed through town and out on Highway Sixty-one to home. I slammed on the brake at the doorstep, just missing it; the gravel flying, Aunt Nanny's geranium plants uprooted, sailing through the air. Stopped at last, a deep groove through the yard, the flower beds cut by the steaming tires, I flipped one leg over the seat, and bounced up the steps.

"Good night, Augie," I flung back over my shoulder. He hadn't put a hand on my privates, since that afternoon in the high school gym shower, and I was infuriated that he had done so now.

"Now wait a minute, Dewy," he called up to me, bouncing off the buddy seat. "You're not flapping on me, are you? Hell, man, what a missing link! Don't bug out on me, man!"

"You did 'that' when you knew I was busy with the wheels. That's why you let me drive."

"Don't you like to drive, Dewy?"

I retraced my steps and stood before him, my blood curdling. "Hell, Augie! Sure, but not with you coming on strong."

He laughed recklessly, pushed his cap to the back of his head. "I was kinda turned on, wasn't I, Smash. But we can make the scene, baby, sure. Like I said, it's a Mickey Mouse thing, and you can drive my wheels all you want."

I gave him a hard look. "Have you flipped your marbles?"

"We can lay off all them chicks, man," he said, serious. His eyes, even in the dusk light, blazed at me from far reaching depths. I had seen that look before, when he wanted something badly, and it chilled me anew." Just you and me against the whole scene. We'll just stay loose, Smash, hooked up on one another, lay it cool for each other for awhile. Wanta borrow my wheels tomorrow?"

"Are you on the 'stuff'?"

"Ha!" he laughed, a ridiculous laugh, like in a horror movie. He aped a drunken walk, his legs spread, his hands groping, his fingers twisted, like Frankenstein. "I'm high, man . . . all-time! You're pink, Dewy, naked!"

"You've flagged your course, Augie. I'm going up. Good night!"

He immediately resumed his normal state.

"Wait, Dewy. Don't blow your cool, man! You think I'm a trash mouth, putting you on, but I'm not. I'm turned on for you, man, real bad."

"Augie, God! Go to hell!"

"Burned?"

"Sick . . . sick at you."

His face, like a kindled flame, changed expression, and his eyes on me were like coals of fire.

"You're asking for a big flap, ain't you? You gonna get it. You call me sick, a nerd. What about your two sisters . . . bird-dogs!"

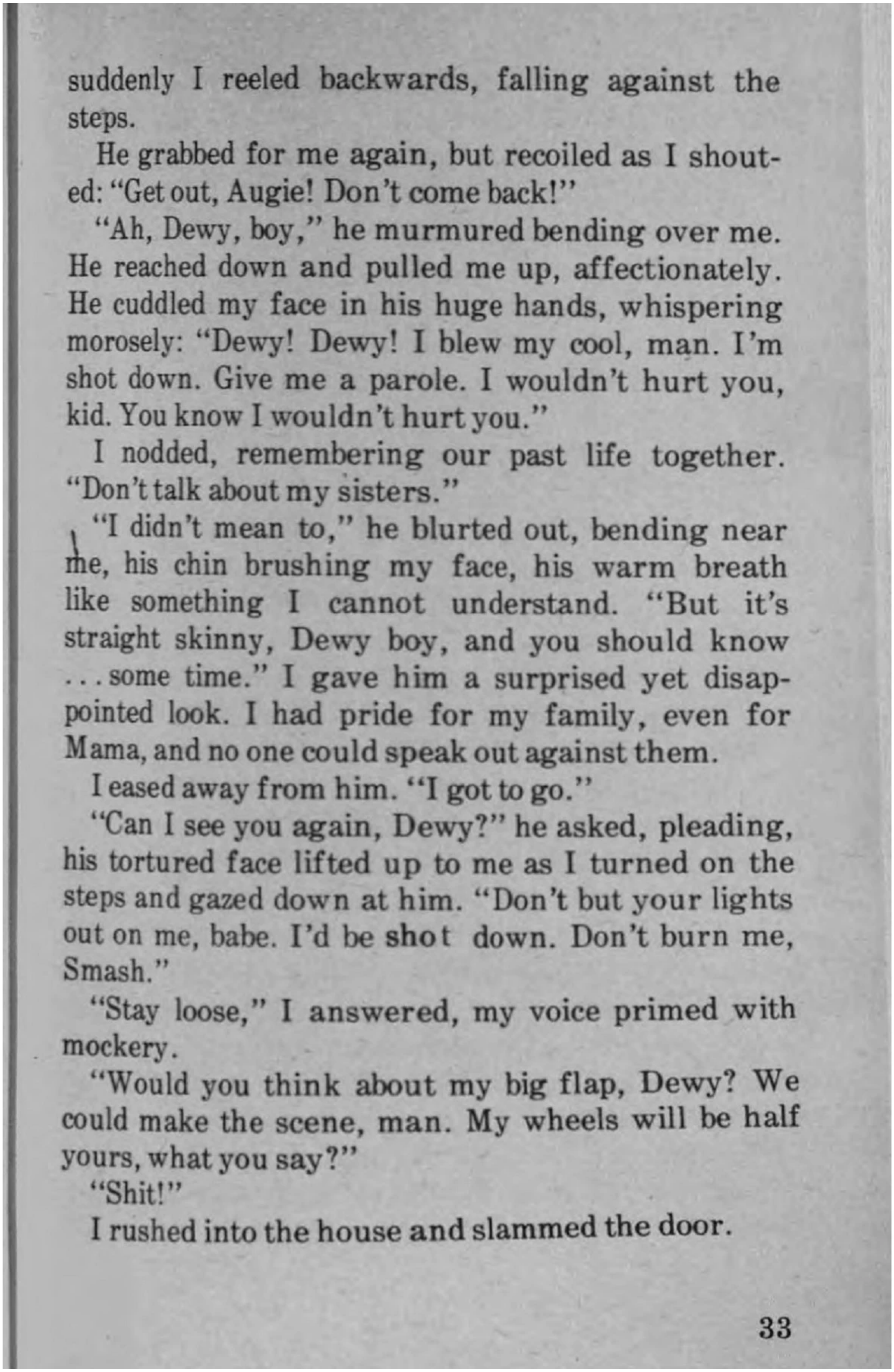
"What do you mean?"

"Quit buggin' me."

"Lesbo's, man. Where you been, in a tree?"

The breath left my lungs. Every vein in my body instantly tightened. I could feel the rapid beating of my heart. Fury and fear and despair swept me into a confusing nightmarish coma. Like lightening I coiled back my fist and struck him directly in the mouth. He reeled, taken by surprise, grabbed his face, his dark hair a wild mass above his flaming eyes. "Go to hell, you . . . fruit!"

"You burned, man, you burned!" he half-screamed, growling ferociously, then laughed a tormenting laugh. His fist flared up, hard and dark and



suddenly I reeled backwards, falling against the steps.

He grabbed for me again, but recoiled as I shouted: "Get out, Augie! Don't come back!"

"Ah, Dewy, boy," he murmured bending over me. He reached down and pulled me up, affectionately. He cuddled my face in his huge hands, whispering morosely: "Dewy! Dewy! I blew my cool, man. I'm shot down. Give me a parole. I wouldn't hurt you, kid. You know I wouldn't hurt you."

I nodded, remembering our past life together. "Don't talk about my sisters."

"I didn't mean to," he blurted out, bending near me, his chin brushing my face, his warm breath like something I cannot understand. "But it's straight skinny, Dewy boy, and you should know . . . some time." I gave him a surprised yet disappointed look. I had pride for my family, even for Mama, and no one could speak out against them.

I eased away from him. "I got to go."

"Can I see you again, Dewy?" he asked, pleading, his tortured face lifted up to me as I turned on the steps and gazed down at him. "Don't but your lights out on me, babe. I'd be shot down. Don't burn me, Smash."

"Stay loose," I answered, my voice primed with mockery.

"Would you think about my big flap, Dewy? We could make the scene, man. My wheels will be half yours, what you say?"

"Shit!"

I rushed into the house and slammed the door.

CHAPTER THREE

I went into my room and sprawled across the bed. I listened quietly, alert to the sound of his motor as he turned around in the driveway and roared down Sixty-one toward town.

My mind whirled in a state of confusion. Augie! There was so much I didn't know about him. Fruits! I knew absolutely nothing about them . . . cared less. Oh, Augie and I had remarked about them, as all boys will do; giving cat calls when one hip-swayed it down a street, giving us the fish-eye. Or, listening in on conversations with other boys who related of rollings, beatings, filthy sex charates; even hearing of hustling them for money, handouts, food, clothes, a place to stay. But they were all vague, unnatural intermissions in my life; bits of talk and action forgotten the moment they were over . . . like a hundred and one other things we casually talked about, laughed over, compared.

But now, tonight, the situation of that strange forbidden world was striking home. Violet and Laurel! Fruits! Girl fruits!

Tears rolled down my face as I lay in the noisy darkness. I couldn't believe what Augie told me was the truth . . . not Violet and Laurel. And all the talk I had ever heard about these seemingly low-classed people, these whispered-about beings who were strange, unwanted, unaccepted, clouded about me, swarming like blood sucking bats. And voices, dim, distant, then loud, screaming, yelled through my mind; dead voices out of my dead past, but alive now. Reincarnated!

"See that guy over there? A three dollar bill."

"Go to the boondocks with him, kid. He'll lay a five on you."

"Lousy queer! Wanted me for nothing!"

"They can have it, but they gotta pay, and pay plenty."

"He'll take it standing up. Just bend him over a little."

"Tell him you're a hustler. Then they think they're getting their money's worth."

"Don't be a goose, man. Just pretend you come. Them fruity old maids don't know the difference."

"Say you'll go for twenty first, and stick to that. You'll end up getting fifteen at least."

"This old man bought me this drink, see, then lays his hand on my leg . . . lousy fairy!"

"He picked me up, and offered to take me all the way to L.A. if I would let him come on with me."

"This fat jerk sits down beside me in the show. The next thing I knew he was unzipping me, man . . . right in public!"

"They ought to put 'em all in prison . . . ."

"It's a Mickey Mouse thing, Smash. Everybody is doing it . . . ."

I leaped up from bed, went to the kitchen, switched on the light and rambled through the refrigerators. Thoughts darted at me, pricked my every nerve. I took a chicken leg and poured myself a glass of milk. A light was on in the den so I investigated. It was my Aunt Nanny, swathed in the gold of a floor lamp, her silvery white head bowed before an enormous book.

"Where's Laurel and Violet?" I asked, slumping down on the settee opposite her. I did not have to ask about Mama. She was out with some man.

"Went to a show," Aunt Nanny answered, not glancing up from her book. "Something with Bette Davis."

"Have we seen it, Auntie?"

"I think . . . with Anne Baxter."

"Auntie."

"Yes, Dewy . . . you can have five."

I looked directly at her. "I wasn't going to ask you for money."

"Don't frighten me," she cooed, smiling. "When you don't ask for money, I know something is wrong."

"You don't like my asking?"

"I'd die of heartbreak if you didn't."

I kept my silence for an instant. I chewed on the chicken leg, ripping it from the bone with my sharp animal teeth, as I thought of Augie.

"Auntie . . . are Violet and Laurel . . . strange?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I've got to know. It's worrying hel . . . heck out of me."

She looked up, her narrow old eyes like glittering slits under the gold of the lamp. "You can cuss in my presence, Dewy. Wasn't I married to a tugboat captain for forty years?"

"It worries hell out of me."

"Everybody's strange, Dewy."

I swallowed hard. I loathed bringing up such a subject to her, but I knew she would know, and would be honest in her answer. "I mean . . . fruity . . . strange."

"Lesbian fruity?"

I nodded my head. My eyes flinched. I felt so diminutive before her.

"Who told you that?"

"Augie."

She drew a quick breath. "Three cheers for Augie. He rates a medal for clairvoyance."

I waited expectantly, my thoughts, my worry deepening. "Then . . . they are," I declared, yet daring to declare.

She nodded, glanced once at her opened book, then to me. "Dewy, we don't condemn people born with one eye, or one ear, or one leg shorter than the other, or dwarfed, or ugly, do we?"

"Why no, Auntie . . . why should we?"

"Then . . . why condemn Laurel and Violet? They were born as they are, from no fault of their own. They didn't prefer to be born as they are, or to be born at all, for that matter."

My mind was puzzled.

"Fruits are born fruits?"

"Of course they are born. If they could help their predicament, don't you think they would? Dewy, they must live miserable lives, condemned at every turn. That is why they are so courageous. They have to be, in order to survive among the normal ones."

I thought for a minute, sipping on my glass of milk. "Violet and Laurel don't act unhappy. They're always laughing. I've never seen either of them cry, except when they were little."

"Some things are too deep for tears, Dewy. Because they are the way they are is no reason for them to mope about, feeling sorry for themselves. Besides, crying wouldn't help."

"How can we help them, Auntie?" I asked seriously, considering my two sisters, actually, for the first time. And in this new light, I was deeply sorry for them, not from what I was hearing, but from something unknown and unexplained deep within me, as if I too was affected in some mysterious way . . . like them . . . yet was unaware of it.

She shrugged, placed a purple silk marker in her book and closed it. She rubbed her eyes, patted her glistening hair and sat musing, as if undecided whether to tell me a kind lie or the truth. Then she gazed at me, a prolonged, searching look. "We've tried to talk to them, Dela and me, but it only makes matters worse. They both withdraw, clam up, like turtles. Then it's impossible to get a word out of them. Ashamed, I think. They know the whole world is against them, so they must feel this strongly, like a criminal or something, like they've committed some terrible wrong and realize they should be punished." She paused, studying a photograph of them when they were babies which sat with a group of other pictures on an end table. "Truthfully, I think both girls want to do what is right, what is normal. That is why they like to putter around a woman's dress shoppe, to make friends with women without . . . without the other . . . the reason they hang around that club, what's its name?"

"The Dutch Boy," I informed her, my mind keyed, my heart responding to her every word.

"There, they come in contact with others like them, strike up mutual friendships. They're in their world there, without the outside world peering in, prying. Which is good, I think."

"The Dutch Boy is a fruit place?"

"For lesbians mostly, Dewy, those like your sisters. They have to go somewhere. It relieves the tension. There they feel free, wanted."

She sighed heavily, her head trembling. I studied her there in the amber light; admiring her, her ancient wisdom, her striking knowledge of present events; a contemporary, that eternal contemporary in a world of bigotry and minuteness. Her eyes seemed lost, far away, here in the gloom, echoing the burning in her heart. "My best girl friend at school was like that, Dewy," she went on quietly, not looking at me, her face a profile of solitude. "She and I did everything together that other girls do . . . went to parties, dances, had boy friends. I never suspected her until almost graduation. When I married. She cried like her heart was going to break. The last time I saw her she was wearing mannish suits, had her hair cut short, wore low heeled shoes. She was a railroad detective, doing what she said she loved, and she seemed happy at it, in part playing the role of a man. I guess that was her substitute."

"Auntie, how did you learn about Violet and Laurel . . . how did you and Mama find out?"

"A woman came and told us, her gym instructor, I believe. She was like that herself, and sensed it in our girls."

"Can they really tell about others? I heard they could."

"They can always tell . . . like a sixth sense, or seventh, or like they were born ahead of us in time, and know things we cannot know. Like a blind bird can tell another bird of its own species. They can usually tell with a glance."

"Do you think Augie is like that?"

"He must be, a little, Dewy boy, or he wouldn't have recognized it so readily in Laurel and Violet." She looked at me sternly. "How did the subject get started?"

I blushed, withdrew into silence. Then, thinking of my sisters, I blurted out, before giving myself time to think: "He . . . he wants me to do things . . . with him . . . thinks I'm like Laurel . . . and . . .

Violet."

She fastened her sharp eyes on me, locked me in her gaze. "Thought you and Augie were the best of friends."

"We are, Auntie, perfect friends, in fact. That's why it hurts so much, to think he wants . . . ."

"Well, if it's a perfect friendship the way it is, then there is no need for further additions . . . ."

I fidgeted, knowing how right she was. Yet, uncontrolled, my thoughts sank in a quigmire of ideas . . . ideas Augie had put into my head. "Maybe I am like them, Auntie."

She jerked her head up quickly, and I noticed her flinch. She preened the lace at her wrists, her rings, turning them over and over on her bony fingers, as if she were wringing some kind of mysterious message from them, tuning them in to our world, this embarrassing subject.

"Dewy . . . what makes you say such a thing?"

I knew I was her pride and joy, though little I had ever done for her, and I longed to spare her this; but we had made a pact long ago that we would hold nothing from the other.

"Well," I began, feeling the blood thicken in my face, along my neck. "When I go down a street, see display windows with women's things, I always stop and look. I study the clothes, the many colors, admire the mannequins with their shiny wigs and glass eyes. In fact, they seem like me, when I look at women's clothes, posing in a way, and I think . . . I would look good in that. They seem to hold me in some kind of spell, like I was hypnotized or something. But then, if I am interrupted by something or someone, I realize how ridiculous I seem . . . a boy, wanting to wear women's clothes. And I'm no sissy, Auntie. You know that."

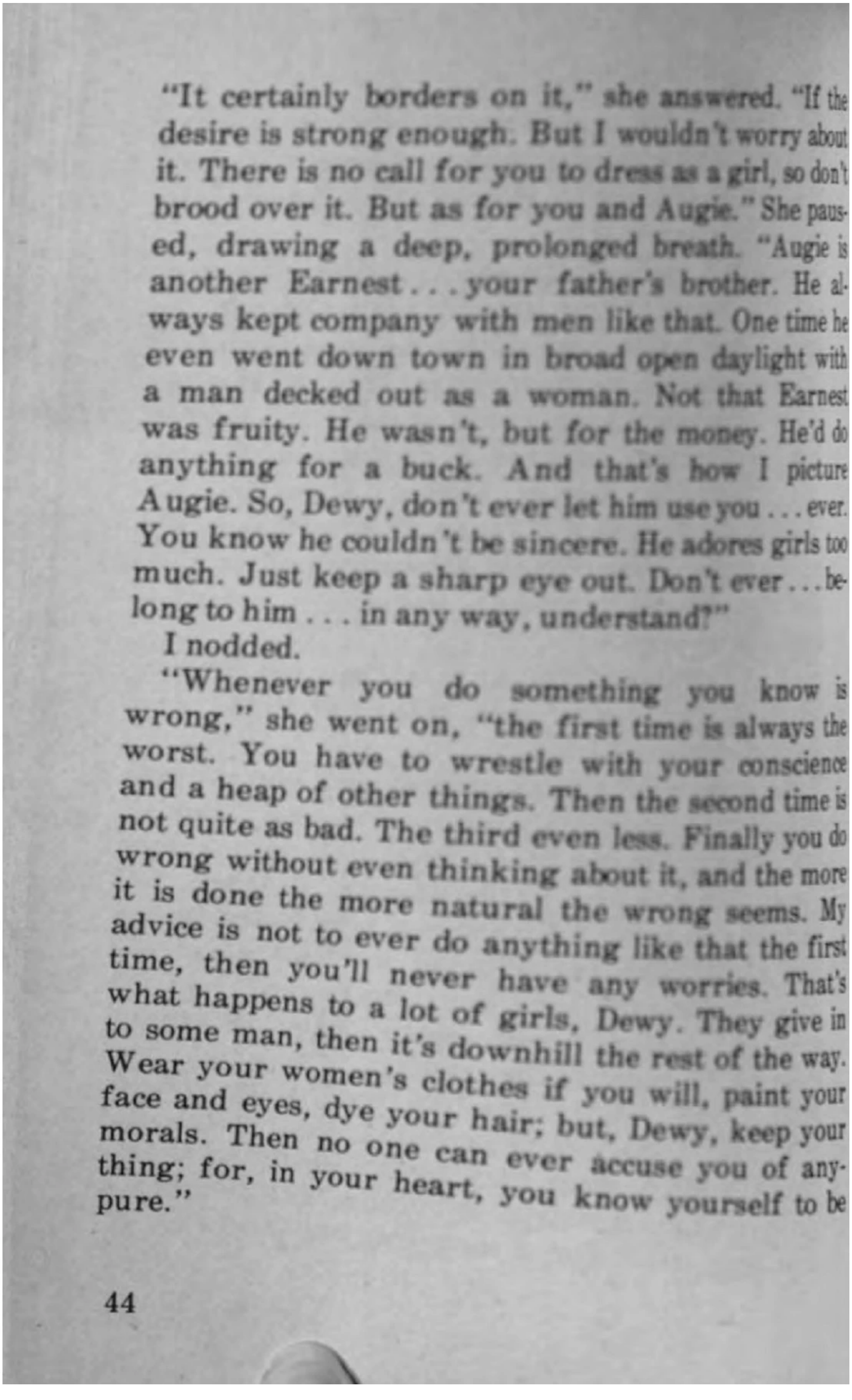
She nodded, her prim face soft, delicate as a moth under the light. "You should read *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf. The compulsion to wear clothes of the opposite sex is no new thing. Look at Marlene Dietrich. She even wore men's attire in the movies. In fact, scripts were written so that she could wear them . . . *Morocco, Blonde Venus, Shanghai Express, Scarlet Empress* . . . even *The Devil is a Woman.* And there are female impersonators in California and in New Orleans. Some men are more beautiful than women!"

"But I'm not beautiful, Auntie. I'm a boy, all boy. Why do I want to do such things at times . . . to dress like a woman?"

"I don't know," she answered, and her old eyes lost their dark sparkle. "But you are small, Dewey, and I suppose, living in a house with four women all your life has had its drawbacks. Frankly, I'm surprised you haven't turned out to be fruity, or sissified. Most boys would have. But, we never did coddle you, thank God. You always have had the run of the house and the town. Hanging around boys rougher, tougher than you."

"But I don't want to be like that," I stammered, taken back that she was accepting this so casually. "I don't want to wear girl things. But why, Auntie . . . why do I get this urge sometimes? Is it fruity?"

She was silent for a moment, her face a blank.



"It certainly borders on it," she answered. "If the desire is strong enough. But I wouldn't worry about it. There is no call for you to dress as a girl, so don't brood over it. But as for you and Augie." She paused, drawing a deep, prolonged breath. "Augie is another Earnest . . . your father's brother. He always kept company with men like that. One time he even went down town in broad open daylight with a man decked out as a woman. Not that Earnest was fruity. He wasn't, but for the money. He'd do anything for a buck. And that's how I picture Augie. So, Dewy, don't ever let him use you . . . ever. You know he couldn't be sincere. He adores girls too much. Just keep a sharp eye out. Don't ever . . . belong to him . . . in any way, understand?"

I nodded.

"Whenever you do something you know is wrong," she went on, "the first time is always the worst. You have to wrestle with your conscience and a heap of other things. Then the second time is not quite as bad. The third even less. Finally you do wrong without even thinking about it, and the more it is done the more natural the wrong seems. My advice is not to ever do anything like that the first time, then you'll never have any worries. That's what happens to a lot of girls, Dewy. They give in to some man, then it's downhill the rest of the way. Wear your women's clothes if you will, paint your face and eyes, dye your hair; but, Dewy, keep your morals. Then no one can ever accuse you of anything; for, in your heart, you know yourself to be pure."

CHAPTER FOUR

My mother owned and operated a cafe and bar below the hill, facing the river. It was called the Sea Shell. Squeezed between a row of equally dilapidated buildings; all unpainted sun scorched, plastered with soft drink signs, metal awnings, sparse neon tubing; it was a fitting stage for its customers.

Both negroes and whites frequented the place . . . that is, the whites dominated the dark, chocolate-colored interior, and the negroes, in long noisy lines, purchased beer and liquor from a little screened window in the rear.

I often operated this post, sitting on a high stool just inside and passing out beer to the blacks through a hinged screened opening, especially if I was broke and had momentarily drained my aunt of her ready cash. My mother grudgingly handed me a dollar or two now and then, without my asking, but always with, "Dewy, when you gonna find you a job?" or, "It doesn't grow on trees, you know." So I felt better if I helped her sometimes.

The place was always dirty, with river men tracking in mud and sand from the wharf, and it smelled strongly of stale beer, tobacco, greasy hamburgers, and mustard, along with the rancid smell of sweaty negroes, and the fish odor of unwashed bodies. This, mingled with the smell of mold from the decaying building, the long dangling syrup-dipped fly killers, the grimy fly-specked windows, the dark naked beamed-ceiling where smoke clung for days, the muck of the earth; the smell of dogs gathered outside, of roaming negro children congregating out front, of rubber boots and rope hemp and khaki; the clutter, the noise, the old jukebox barking and vibrating the creaky walls, the decorous plop of fat whores rank with old perfume; the cloying sweetness of greasy pomade, the faint fragrance of a freshly cut flower balanced on some whore's bosom, the sick smell of hot chili and grease . . . grease . . . grease . . . and foaming beer in dingy mugs. All combined, they made this dark hovel a stink pot from which I rebelled. But because so many drunks, both black and white, infiltrated the place, mostly on Saturday afternoons after everyone had been paid, I usually kept my vigil at the stool, smoking, thumbing through comic books or old movie *Silver Screen* magazines my aunt and I hoarded; a sharp eye out now and then for any signs of trouble. Someone was always pawing at Mama. She relished this, I suppose, as she brought it on herself most of the time, and hardly a Saturday passed that some drunk did not openly insult her or try to make improper advances.

Usually, Augie sat behind me or worked one of the bars, doling out beer to the river drunks while I doled it out to the sweaty, garrulous negroes. These included both men and women, who chatted and giggled, some wiggling their fat asses in cadence to the jukebox, stomping their bare black feet; their long arms above their heads. Mostly well behaved, especially the men, their even, beautiful white teeth were instantly displayed when they were next to be served at my window. Bowing obediently . . . when it wasn't necessary . . . not to me anyway, they obeyed laws enforced over a hundred years ago. Inbred with that blind tyranny of master and slave, inbred so thoroughly it still persisted dominantly in their children; never out of line with action or voice; docile to a fault; they returned again and again as each Saturday afternoon wore on miserably. They all knew me, called me Mist' Dewy, and they never failed to speak or call a greeting to me whenever I passed them on the street. This, frankly, seemed only natural, for they were still 'our children' although the Yankees had freed them over a hundred years ago. We considered, like every other white in Vicksburg, that they were still our responsibility.

I thought it rather cruel in a way to force them to stand in line outside for their beer, then to drink it squatting under the trees, and not within the bar like the other men. There was one boy, especially, who always showed this unfairness to me whenever his face appeared at my window.

His name was Cheka, and among the town's negro population, he was ravishingly handsome. His eyes were sky blue, his complexion the glowing rich color of honey. He was magnificently built, his long arms thick with strutted veins, his well-shaped head set majestically on broad shoulders, his waist small, tapering to narrow hips, his buttocks, thighs obviously pronounced through the sheen of his tan jeans. He rarely wore a shirt, his smooth chest emblazoned with the soft, weaving shadows of the trees, the hair under his arms, thick, black . . . intense black, unlike the almost blondish wool on his head. Around his neck he wore a silver crucifix, and an enormous silver and jade ring dwarfed one finger.

"Hello, Mist' Dewy," he would always say politely, grinning slightly, both hands resting calmly on the little wooden apron; his change . . . the exact amount, always ready. "How you dis afternoon? My usual . . . please."

He would take his beer, smile again, and go off to himself and enjoy it slowly, savoring it, as if he relished its flavor, its effect; but never came back for a second.

For a reason I could not name, I always watched him out of one corner of my eye, in fact studied him. Among negroes, he was immaculate and fresh of body and attire, and stood out head and shoulders above the rest. He appeared, or so to me, a phenomenon in the black world, yet he was always alone . . . never with any girl or male companion. I credit-ed my interest in him mainly, I suppose, to this one reason: that he stood out among the others, and forced one's attention on him separately, like a spotlight on a stage, and once seeing him in a crowd of his own race, you failed to observe anyone else. I often wondered what other negroes thought about him, but I did not dare ask. I had known from infancy never to question one negro about another negro, unless you wanted a nil answer. But I did ask Mama.

"He's a Quadroon . . . and a queer! So leave him alone."

I hated this about her. She was always so blunt, so cuttingly frank, as if she did not give a rap who she hurt. 'Coarse' was my aunt's word for her. Coarse and callous as a man.

"Where does he work?" I asked her, expecting another blunt answer.

She tossed her head, because all the men goggled her, until her ruby ear-rings danced.

"Works in the supply room at the Vanity."

"Where Laurel and Violet work?"

"And as fruity as they are."

I gave her a hot stare and returned to my customers. I could not keep my eyes off him from that moment on. One hot afternoon, after he had finished his beer and had placed his empty bottle in a rack outside for that purpose, I motioned for him to come over. He instantly obeyed.

I handed him a foamy bottle through the little window.

"It's on the house," I muttered, wondering feverishly why I was doing this. Yet, instinctively knew. My little revenge for Mama, with her smar ass answers. I had little, if any love for her, a hers for me equalled mine. We never saw eye to e on anything, and our personalities rebelled, o against the other. There was no softness nor tende ness within her base nature, while mine was all te derness and softness toward others, even though was hard and wiry physically.

"I mustn't take dis, Mist' Dewy," he objecte looking a little surprised, yet a little proud that had singled him out. "I can pay . . . jes' on a budge Mist' Dewy, planning to go to school, come ne fall."

"No, take it," I insisted. "It's on me. You kee your money for your education."

"But I don't feel right, Mist' Dewy," he said, apo ogetic, his pale blue eyes like arc lights in h swarthy face, a face so utterly virile and masculi I couldn't believe that he was a fruit.

"I want you to have it," I said, almost in a cour ing, beguiling way; and this disturbed me to th point of nervousness. And I added boldly, t boldly: "I . . . we understand each other."

These seemed to be the magic words, for his fac bloomed suddenly with the radiance of a flowe photographed by a high-speed camera. And his i blue eyes vibrated with silent, victorious life.

"What school do you have in mind, Cheka?" questioned him, holding up the long line of im patient half-drunks, changing the subject. For h looked like he wanted to tear through the wi screen and embrace me, and this eager look, pronounced by his dark male beauty, all but lured me into doing the same thing: to let him have me. A sudden annoyance at myself, what I was thinking, made me quiver with fear.

"To Alcorn, maybe," he answered politely, his face sharpened with a smile. "But I prefer to go to Tougaloo in Jackson. There I can study art."

"Oh, you're an artist?" I asked, but was mercilessly interrupted by Mama, who came over in a small storm.

"Keep that line moving, Dewy! I don't pay you to chit-chat with black queers!"

"Go to hell!" I shouted back, not bothering to credit her with a glance.

"Don't talk like that to your mother."

"Some mother you are. A cat's a better mother than you!"

"What do you mean by that?" I knew she was glaring at me, her fists clinched like a man's, always, when she is angered; but I kept shoving beers through the window to black, groping hands. Cheka disappeared, leaving like a wisp I had dreamed.

"Well ... you know what a cat is, don't you?" I cried back in my own defense. Augie gave out a loud, "Meaowwwwww!" and it brought down the house. This only infuriated her further, for among the laughter were the falsetto shreiks of the fat whores who slopped over the bar.

"You take sides with that–nigger fruit!" she raved, waving a finger at the screen. "When I work my fingers to the bone for you, hand out spending money to you like it's going out of style. Dam you'll be *marching* with them next!"

I saw the embarrassment on the black faces in t line. Their sweaty brows, their rolling eyes, the stern, shut mouths, their heavy veined arms, ha from physical labor; they were like marble statue under the shadows of the wind driven trees. And surge of embarrassment flooded my every sens not for myself, but for Mama's cheapness, her di regard for their race – in their very presence.

"Shut your painted trap!" I spat back, much t Augie's delight, for he and she were always lock-ing horns. "If I need money, I can get it from Auntie."

"Any way to get it easy," she came back tartly, and with some truth. "Your palm's out with Nanny, with both the girls, and with me."

"Lower your voice! You want to tell the whole goddamned town?"

"I don't have to," she half screamed, that drunke woman scream. "Everybody who has a lick of sense knows you do nothing but hang out on these filthy streets, bumming smokes, a drink. You'll be putting out next, if you can make a dime outa it . . . like that, that malt colored Cheka."

"Mama! Drat you . . . you bitch!"

That silenced her. You can't go deeper than the truth. She was a bitch, with some more added. She removed her perfumed carcass, and in a ring of smoke (she is also a chain smoker) was back behind the bar.

Augie came over, setting several opened beers on the apron. "You gone ape for that black nigger?"

"Don't call him nigger!" And I said more softly, "They don't like being called that."

"Bet that ape's hung like a plow mule," he said chidingly, but the light in his eyes deepened, hungrily; and he leaned on the apron, peering through the screen as if to seek him out.

"Does that gnaw on your precious ego?" I asked, then answered my own question. "Of course it does. You're so damned vain about your own size."

"It'd satisfy you any magnolia-moonlit night, Dewy boy," he bragged, fondling his crotch. "I'm a mover, man, so don't turn me on."

"I have no intentions of that," I answered flatly, shoving a beer through the window to a fat negro woman with a naked baby under each arm. "Have you thought some, Smash, about being my closet case?"

"Hell, no . . . you fruity fruit!"

He laid a warm, but nervous hand on my shoulder, leaning close.

"Quit pawing me," I cried. "I'm not your whore."

"Ah, Dewy, don't be a goose," he said with affection. "We could have a ball, hung up on each other: like lovers, man. Real gone lovers. I wouldn't burn you. I'd never cut out on you, not once."

"Don't waste your smelly breath."

He rubbed his knee against my behind, lovingly.

"You don't put me on, Smash. You're slobbering for a real man. It shows, daddy, shows like a whore with a watermelon. Everybody knows she's been screwed, and she can't hide it, man. Just like you."

"Kill it!" I cried, furious. "I don't lay for no one
Go find yourself another queer."

"Don't you call me no queer, Dewy," he spat back angrily. "Bet you'd lay for that horse-hung Cheka soon enough, if he wired you in."

"I might," I answered saucily, merking back my head, and I thought of Cheka momentarily, how he might look without his clothes on.

"Up your ass then!"

Augie shoved off.

I considered what he had said, the awesome thought of it, the pain. Which brought to mind a stage play I had once seen, but had not considered until Augie had brought it to light. It was Shakespeare's *Edward III*, when he was imprisoned and tortured by having his rectum jammed with a red hot poker. I did not sense tht true essence of it then, the meaning, for I had been too preoccupied with the stage settings, the glorious costumes. A touring Broadway troupe had put it on, and the voices of the players had been drowned out by my inattention to anything but the splendor of their dress, the awe of the dimly lit stage, the dream people came to life! I had seen myself in the role, a perfect double for the flamboyant man who had portrayed Edward. His slight gestures, his mock charades, his mannerisms; all advertised a certain character, a type which, at the time, completely eluded me.

Now I seemed to see, to understand the role; now that I was on the very threshold of men like Edward the Third, and men like Augie and Cheka who longed for the compassion of others like themselves. My mind was beginning to thaw. I saw Cheka almost weekly, speaking to him at the window, slipping him a free beer, fascinated by this golden negro with the sky blue eyes; awed by something I could not understand, nor erase, nor forget. He was always there, smiling at me through the screen, his eyes on me like hot glass, searching, hungry, groping with his steady, eager gaze.

I knew it was wrong to think these things, let alone feel them. I knew it was wrong, even with white people, one white man with another white man, knew that it represented something inwardly repulsive and profane. Yet, it stirred something startling within me, erupted some remote something I considered nil, or sleeping, or nonexistent . . . or, better, something which I refused myself, I tried to tell myself it did not belong in my world, had no bearings within the borders of my physical desires, the main-spring of my passion. But I was growing up, maturing, and a part of my maturing was realizing that I, too, felt strange, vital sensations within my body, my physical self, the dawning of something utterly provocative, something mystically beautiful, demanding, overpowering.

One Saturday afternoon Mama caught me slipping a beer to Cheka. "If I see you giving away beer to that . . . that faggot, turning into a queer yourself, I'll cut you off without a cent."

I didn't say anything back to her, for I sensed her ultimatum, her intense hatred for all men who were affected, her mistrust and depreciation of all negroes; so I kept my silence.

I never gave Cheka another free beer, but in my inward, silent rebellion for Mama, and women like her, I saw the bitter fruit hanging deliciously for my taking. And now, rebellious, I saw it as something intensely more desirable . . . and for that identical reason: because it was forbidden.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rebellious against society, the world . . . in part . . . mostly against Mama; as the months slipped away, lazy, idle months of doing as I pleased, free to think, to latch onto the easy route, the minority causes, anything ready and handy to me that fought back at the world, I was determined, despite my aunt's advice, to get even; and at the same time satisfy myself about the negro . . . Cheka.

Now that I was older, more aware of the world and the vast differences in people, the social gaps, the physical breeches, the dominating drives, the ignition which motivited, propelled people, secretly I became aware, through them, of myself.

I began to lift the veil of my own body, my own mind. I began to see myself as something single, apart from the other forms, alien to the common mobs of the streets, began to search out my counterpart, began to question my own private motivations.

I did not, would not believe that I was turning into a fruit. I liked girls. They in turn liked me, or acted so. And though I never sought out any one girl, never indulged in a romance, I felt secure in the realm I had constructed for myself. Because I thought deep, because I was naturally sensitive, because I was hurt by people; what they said: like Mama, what they did: like Augie, how they were: like Laurel and Violet, I withdrew into myself, became all the more the mythological hero, my rebellion acute. I longed for my old, innocent dream world, and the older I got the farther that dream world slipped away, as factual callousness, as brutal selfishness, as the bigotry of man moved on stage.

"Every motive is a selfish one," my aunt surmised wisely, and I began to realize this more and more. "Even the dreams of Jesus were selfish dreams, if he ever lived, which I doubt mercifully. For he promised paradise in exchange for worldly goodness of man. Even our prayers, Dewy, are selfish. We inform God that we will do this or that if he will do thus and so. The man who loves is selfish, so is the man who hates."

And I hated, a little. I hated the world, mainly because so much beauty, so much wonder, seemed to be cancelled out; And cancelled in exchange for false beliefs, false lives, false fronts. And icing that falseness, like sugared frosting on a layer cake: the dirt, the shallowness, the awesome reality of the flesh and blood man, the ugly degeneracy of what is basically man beneath. Take off the frosting, and the true monster, the heathen is revealed.

I wanted life to remain like a dimly-lit stage, to see things a little hazy, like images from a lantern show. So I avoided the reality, the vivid impact of reality, the harsh brutality of life itself. I was refusing to grow up.

But came one Sunday, all too abruptly; like a summer storm, when there is no forerunner of thunder and lightning to allow us an avenue of retreat.

My aunt and two sisters and I always had lunch at the Southern Tea Room. Mama never attended, nor did she go to church, utilizing Sundays as a refuge of sleep, putting her in shape to reign as empress in her temple of tugboat degenerates. Usually Augie accompanied us, for he was in great part a clown, especially in the presence of girls, and kept everyone in stitches.

The Southern Tea Room stood perched high upon "The Hill," by which name everyone referred to that main portion of Vicksburg overlooking the river. Waitresses, colored girls in bright red gingham dresses to their ankles, bandanas, and white aprons, neatly starched, catered to the guests; while others hovered over a long row of cast iron wood stoves in the rear, the smell of hickory permeating the clear air. In full viewing of the dining room, they turned out delicious fried chicken, ham, eggs, bacon, stuffed peppers, steaks and fried potatoes, cornbread stuffings, salads of every description, and tiny peppered biscuits no larger than your thumb, served in heated sterling silver m jolicas.

The walls were a refreshing mint green, litter with numerous paintings by local artists. Down o lengthy wall were displayed souvenirs for sal Confederate flags, toy Rebel soldiers, ashtra with Civil War battle scenes, tiny bales of cotto jugs of syrup, dueling pistols, Confederate gar son caps, statues of some of the fighting genera including Grant and Lee, silken handstitched han kerchiefs depicting battle scenes, and silk pillo covers embroidered with gleaming white magno as, southern mansions, delicate ladies in hoo skirts, and miniature cannons. And in the rear the building there was a lounge, the entran draped with enormous maroon drapery, drippi with tassles.

A cheery atmosphere, both of the old and ne the Civil War-romantic charm made radiant modern electric lighting, air-conditioning, a stylish dress.

We had a wonderful time, and as Aunt Nan picked up the tabs and paid near the exit, I had inkling this would be our last outing together; f how does one know what lies ahead, when the pre ent is but a knife slice between two endless ete nities . . . the past and the future.

The sun was warm, the sky cloudless, clear, whe we came out, and Augie and I decided to take a vantage of the pleasant weather and stroll in o Sunday best. Aunt Nanny and my sisters whirle out of the parking lot in Laurel's little canary ye low Mustang, and shot like a rocket up Highway Sixty-one toward home.

Augie and I passed the church. We paused under a shady oak and watched as a covey of giggling girls, all turned out in bright crinolines, rustling taffetas, flower-banked hats with long trailing ribbons, gloves and coin purses, came up the sidewalk and into the circling walk under the trees to the church itself.

"Wow! San Quentin quail!" Augie squeaked, clapping his hands, which was a habit of his when he became excited. "Ripe and ready for plucking. I'm turned on, man. Fresh, man, right off the ice. Bet they don't even have any fuzz yet. Scare hell outa them, if they saw my ugly stick."

"Not so loud," I cautioned, noticing one of the girls, hardly fourteen at the most, turn and stare.

"They gotta know sometimes, Smash. Get them griddle cakes while they're hot, man. If you wait for them to cool, then some other cat gets them . . . see?" He turned his head almost completely around without turning his body. "I'll take that little all-time in the yellow pajama top. I could make a heap big flap, man." His eyes locked on the girl, then on the others as they skipped, squealing with laughter, up the walk.

"Cool it, man!" I cried, giving him a signal with a brush of my hand. "You gone loony? Right in front of church?"

"I'm Lolita-mad, man," he laughed, rubbing his crotch. A nasty obvious habit of his, he did it deliberately, a swaggering gesture to his over-blossomed maleness. "Them clean chicks is masturbation fodder if I ever seen it."

"Well put your hands in your grubby pockets and shut up."

"You're a goose, Smash." Then he added seriously, his voice a slight tremble, "But I love you, babe, really I do."

"Don't put me on."

"Honest, straight skinny, Smash. I do love you, and it ain't queer love, see. I don't flake you when I confess to things like that, Smash."

"We're friends . . . that's all."

"Before the Big Man Up There, and everybody, Smash. Every night, when I seek the great white biscuit, I lie and think about you, Smash. Your the coolest. You make my heart turn dart-wheels!"

"Pity it wasn't your head."

"That's turned too."

"Why don't you punt out about me. I'm not ever gonna . . . ever!"

His expression turned to grimness, and I noticed how handsome he really was when he was dressed up; his wine colored blazer, his white shirt and black shoe-string tie setting his dark swarthiness off to manly perfection. His black hair was brushed back evenly, his animal eyes sparkled, and despite his devil-may-care attitude, he appeared suave, debonair, elegant, I thought too of how he looked naked, as my whole being flushed crimson, and I admitted to myself that his courting me flattered me deeply. Though I would never admit this to him, ever, I had imagined, had created dreams of him making love to me, taking me sexually, beguiling me, conquering me with that persuasive cocksureness of his . . . a terrifying weapon in the hands of one so utterly physical, so demandingly physical. It would be like putting a whip in the hands of a savage. The strike must come . . . from that savage urge, that constant reaction to strike quickly, and draw blood.

He pivoted, leaned against the trunk of the oak, folding his arms, and gazed pensively at the church, the steeple with the silver cross thrust to Heaven.

"Smash . . . is there really a God? Truly, I mean?" He did not look at me, but kept his gaze petrified to the church.

"Auntie says there isn't," I answered, relying on her word. "She said how could there be. For there is nothing outside nature, and He would have to be outside nature to exist as man says he exists, which she says is impossible. Besides, she says, how could women, just hundreds and hundreds of women, over hundreds of years, have babies the natural way, even one of them the same; then after all that time some woman has one without being layed."

His gaze shifted like lightening to mine. "Your aunt said that?"

"Why, yes."

"She said layed?"

"Hell, no! She said . . . without being conceived . . . or something like that."

"Oh."

We were silent for a moment, our dismal, un-

thinking gaze fixed on passing cars, some
turning in at church, others heading do
toward the lower street section along the rive

"Whew! A hot one today," Augie com
wiping his brow "Let's take a dip, cat
rays."

I nodded in agreement and straddling his
cycle behind him, we put-putted slowly d
main drag; glided down the sun dappled
toward the Mississippi Many people were
the sidewalks on both sides of the highway
stream of pedestrians, young people actu
their way to Battlefield Park, the city po
movie or to the bridge Some were on their
the numerous drugstores for cokes and malts
skating rink, to the museums and souvenir
which dot Vicksburg on practically every stre

I saw Cheka among them, but walking
apart, aloof; oblivious of his race and perha
his "condition."

He was decked out in white jeans, wid
belt, and a red short sleeved shirt; and h
muscular arms, seen even from this glari
tance, showed strutted veins, savage masculin

"There's your buddy," Augie said moc
slowing the cycle. He wasn't aware that I
ready seen him. "Let's go over to him."

We pulled up alongside him, taking him
prise, and came to an abrupt halt amid a
of teenagers of both sexes leaping and sk
like an army of elves.

"Hi, Mist' Dewy and Mist' Augie," Chek

pleasantly, his hands on his hips, his legs spread wide, as if he were trying to manage his balance. It was a stance I would come to recognize later in the bars and along the streets of New Orleans.

We returned his greeting. He was all smiles, obviously pleased that we had grounded all our attention on him.

"Where you going?" Augie asked, flitting his gaze from Cheka to several flighty girls who hip-swayed it around the motor.

"I'm goin' to the library," Cheka answered, his blue-white eyes a detailed mirror of the sky: two miniature heavens in his smooth, brown face.

"Like to take a swim with us?" Augie asked, punching me in the gut with his elbow.

"I can't be seen with you white boys," Cheka answered, and with keen forethought. "Not with all this black uprising, and civil rights marches, and the Ku Klux Klan, and burning crosses, and hangin's. They'd tar and feather me. You know that, don't you, Mist' Dewy?"

I nodded, squinting at the burning sun. "We don't feel like that, Cheka. But for your own safety . . ."

"Yessuh," then on second thought: "Where you boys go swimming, anyhow?"

Augie told him, and I felt the tension growing, like an ill omen: I was embarking upon something which I was certain I was not altogether going to like; and I wanted to turn back at this moment, wanted to forget this crazy idea of taking a negro in swimming with us.

"It's a sandbar, just north of where Highwa Eighty crosses the river. There are a lot of trees, completely safe to do—whatever we want to do. Nobody ever goes there. It's the boondocks, man, the absolute end."

"I'll meet you there later, then," Cheka agreed, beaming. "Do I have to bring a suit?"

"Naked, man . . . ape naked!" Augie informed him, wheeling the motor around and giving it gut We waved after the absent minded Cheka as w shot up the highway, then down a narrow, dusty road toward the river and the sandbar. We parked the motor on a shaded bluff, and went down a winding path a short way to where the heavy limbed trees thinned to the sandbar and the river itself.

As we began to take off our clothes and hang them over a nearby limb, I couldn't refrain from saying to Augie: "I don't like Cheka coming i swimming with us."

"Don't be a bird-dog, Smash," he remarked, strolling out on the bar completely naked, his body s dark the bright light of the sun couldn't lighten it. "Don't flap on me, babe. Just keep it cool, man We'll have some fun with this chocolate cup-cake."

"Leave me out. I don't want no part in it."

"We're just gonna pop our nuts, Smash. What th hell! I keep telling you. It's a Mickey Mouse deal."

"But with him! Boy, you're sure asking for trouble."

His giddy expression waned completely, an something of fearful mockery took its place. Coming over to me, he fondled my behind, his lips twisting down in a nasty frown, his dark, sun blazed eyes hauntingly terrifying.

I knocked his hand away. "You want my foot in your crotch?"

"Cool it, man." He laughed, a long bitter laugh, and I wondered forlornly why I liked him at all. He was so radically different, so acidly different when sex was on his mind. Then he said threateningly: "If you don't let me, he will. So what's it gonna be, Smash? I know you've blown your cool over me, and I preferred it to be you. But I'm turned on, man, got to ditch the juice."

I looked. He was indeed that. And his body, his loins, turgid now, filled me with an anguish I couldn't name. Emotions stirred within me, vibrated every nerve, and though repulsed by Augie and his sexual demands, I was also fascinated, drunk as an elf enebriated on blossom dew, the wanton nectar of a man's loins.

For a timeless time we dove, swam, heckled one another, as we had done as kids; without hints, without threats of passion. And the sun was sinking in the west, throwing a fanfare of bright gold over the bridge and the horizon of dark trees when we climbed out of the water and dried our bodies while we stood talking on the sandbar.

"I just wish I could make you understand all this, to read me, man," Augie whispered, sidling close to me, both hands on my shoulders; this time as a friend, without passion, without his urgent approach. "It ain't dirty, like you think, Dewy boy, and I'd . . . I'd always look out for you, protect you, kinda. We'd be the most, man, aces. You and me are animals, Smash. Let's try and make the scene."

"Augie," I whispered to him, my voice hardly audible. "I've thought about it, really. I've thought about it lots. But I can't. I just can't. It's fruity, and I don't like fruits."

"Not when it's with two cats like us," he explained, squinting at the swords of light bursting through the leaves of the trees, his eyes tiny slits outlined with briskly dark curling lashes. Then he opened them wide and fixed them steadily on me. "I know I'm crazy at times, a big flap. But under these grubby rags I want you, Smash, and I know that; and that's a straight skinny, coming from the old ticker. All I have to do is tune in on your naked ass and I right off beat my lizard. It's wild, man. And I cry sometimes, Dewy boy, cry about you . . . cry 'cause I might not ever have you, and it gnaws, down in the guts."

"I'm sorry, Augie," I murmured, and I felt his desire profoundly, like the sun beating against my back. "I wish it could be different."

He bowed his head, his hands still on my shoulders, his dark hair tumbling into his eyes. "You didn't think a cat like me ever turned on the dew drops, did you, Smash? Well, I do . . . for you, for you."

"Augie!" I said, and I was on the verge of tears myself; my whole life, the essence of it, leading to this crucial moment.

"Yes, Dewy boy."

"Did you mean it earlier . . . about taking Cheka, if you couldn't have me?"

"Dewy," he murmured hoarsely, his voice low, gutted with passion. "I've got to wake you up sometime. You can't stay a kid all your life. Got to show you the blunt way, man. Like a fist in the gizzard. Make you open your eyes, see the zoo like it really is. I flame out at the idea of hurting you, babe, but I gotta, or you may bug out on me forever."

"Can't we just be friends?"

"Naw, we can't. Cause I've seen you mother naked, and I know what apes me. You turn me on, big, and there ain't no going back to being just Huckleberry and Tom Sawyer pals. We've got to dig each other from now on, or . . . or . . . we gotta split."

There was a rustle of leaves, a shuffle in the sand.

It was Cheka.

I stood, in a state of confusion, and watched as Augie went up to Cheka, heard him ask him to ditch his clothes. There was so much I longed to tell Augie, so much I wanted to discuss with him, but it was too late now, too late to do anything but remain and watch.

Under our watchful gaze, Cheka peeled out of his clothes and stood as naked as the day he gushed from his mammy's womb – a dark, turgid savage, a prince among his race; hewn as if from copper, fleeced as if he is to become the emblem of all manly desire. His enormous organ hung limply from its dark cave of wool, nested protectively in the wall of his amber thighs; asleep, but ready to rise when called forth by a whisper, a gentle touch.

"You boys already swum?" he asked, somewhat timidly. Now that he stood basely exposed, the potential of his masculinity ready for the beckoning call, I could see that Augie was going to do the beckoning, for he once again was armed for sexual pleasures, his organ lifting gradually but steadily until it slapped against his navel.

"We've had enough swimming," Augie said, his voice an obvious sex-tremble. He didn't waste a word, nor a minute. "You sure got one, Cheka boy," he leered, his beaded eyes glued to Cheka's crotch. "Your old man must have been a mule."

Cheka laughed timidly, like a small boy caught in an embarrassing predicament. "Yessuh, Mist' Augie."

"Can I put the skin to it, for size?" Augie asked, and his voice trembled now more than ever. I was profoundly embarrassed, both for Cheka and myself. Cheka squirmed, and I saw that he was being affected emotionally, physically. His tool began to rise, slowly, enormously.

"I'm afraid to play 'round," he said, his eyes strangely dull, his thick lips sliding slowly over his teeth like gummed rubber. "You white boys can make a heap of trouble . . . I'm afraid."

"You don't have to be," Augie assured, not taking his eyes from the other's groin. "We're your friends Cheka. Don't Dewy give you beer all the time?"

"Yessuh," he answered, and gave me a hearty smile.

I was infuriated at Augie.

"Shit! I didn't give him drinks for you to . . . to. . . ."

He fastened a terrifying glare on me. "You had your chance, Smash," he interrupted. "Now just stand back and watch the floor show."

He reached down, took hold of Cheka's organ, skinned it back, slowly, assuredly, as if it were his own, a possession; domineering, cocksure, he played with it lovingly.

Cheka stood rooted to the spot, his bronze legs slightly spread, his hands on his naked hips, his eyes hurtfully sad, like the eyes of an animal that has been stabbed, but fearful to fight back.

The hand action was doing its lethal work, and I watched appalled; watched as Cheka's hand went instantly to Augie, saw their bodies strain, fixed rigidly, their every muscle bulging, every vein stretched to the breaking. Then they moved their bodies back and forth, in unison with the manipulating of hands, then they were on the sand, slipping lower and lower, their arms entwining, their thighs chafing the other's thighs; and suddenly, so suddenly that I all but went faint at what I saw, Augie's face buried itself in the huge dark hollow of Cheka's twitching thighs, his lips slipping lovingly over Cheka's gargantuan organ. He went up and down, like a piston of a machine, with frenzied regularity, anxious in a way that was mentally maddening; gasping for that warmth which would surely spurt from the dark, savage limbs.

I sat down wearily, burying my face in my hands. Hot tears ran down my cheeks, dripping on the sand. I couldn't believe! I wouldn't believe!

Augie . . . my best friend!

In blinding remembrance, when all the while th two bodies were locked in passion on the sand, I sa my life with Augie flash like bits of lightnin through my tortured mind. Our dating at schoo trying to race the other over how many girls woul go out with us, our long motorcycle rides throug the country, our quiet meditations in Battlefiel Park, our swims, the movies we had attended, ou mock charades with the other kids in town, at th drugstore, on the streets, gathering at certain stre corners, the pool hall, the Y.M.C.A. for swimmin and acrobatic lessons, baseball, dancing, takin Auntie and my sisters out on the town. He wa good, despite his pranks, his mod slang; courteou when with girls, a perfect gentleman in front o Auntie . . . now this . . . doing this with a negr and greedily, enjoying it.

I got up, not daring to look at them again, an hurriedly got into my clothes. I knew that I coul not have felt more humiliated if I had watched m own mother in an encounter with sex; and I mos certainly would not have been more surprised, fo nothing she did could ever surprise or disappoin me. But Augie was disappointing me, wallowin like an uneducated, immoral savage with a membe of his own sex; defying, by this one deliberate ac every conviction, every beautiful truth we ha shared between us.

He was tearing, like sharp daggers through silk all my most precious reserves, the life we share together, the most loyal of friends, our absolute freedom, all the things we both cherished, lived for, fought to preserve; and this sudden clarity of what he was doing, to me, to him, was maddeningly unhinging my mind.

Reaching the shaded bluff, I noticed his motorcycle parked there on the steep precipice, its gleam eerily prominent in the fast darkening light. And the memory of it, its connection to my life and Augie's, became in an instant an awesome symbol, and a deep, uncontrolled urge demanded something within me: dictated that I destroy it.

Without thinking, enraged, blind with a jealousy I couldn't wholly understand, torn with thwarted rebellion and the desperation to get even, I kicked the parking prop out of place, grabbed the handlebars, and with all my strength, shoved the motor down the hill.

Like an iron runaway, it crashed through the underbrush, tearing over the sandy mounds; and charged straight at Augie and Cheka writing passionately in the soft sand, as if it, in a kind of blind rebellion all its own, was bent on their destruction.

Cheka saw it, letting out a hoarse scream, and simultaneously they both leaped up, terrified out of their wits. They were just in time to jump out of the way before it rushed past laden with tangled garlands of vines, and splashed into the river.

"Damn you!" Augie screamed, glaring at the motorcycle, then up at me perched on the bluff. He was a ghost of frenzy. "You blowed your cool, man! I'll kill you for this!"

The motorcycle sank in a gurgling of bubbles, a churning of mud; there was nothing left but a few leaves floating on top.

Augie charged up the hill at me like a raging bul Then, on second thought, his motor uppermost i his mind, he wheeled and leaped into the river, wading out to where the bubbles erupted like something out of a Frankenstein movie.

"I'm gonna kill you, Dewy!" he screamed hysterically. "You've had it, man! You've flamed out!"

I shouted back at him, unaware of what I was saying, why I was saying it: "After what you've done, Augie, you lost your rights on me, so you deserved what you got!"

He quit probing, stood up in the water, his body dripping, and stared up at me with hurt surprise. "I just did it to make you jealous, Dewy. You know that, Smash."

Something vital, electric awakened within me at his words, the wonderous meaning in them. But terrified still, wary of what he might do if I did return, I made a run for it.

"Please, Dewy," he cried after me. "Please don't run off! I ain't gonna kill you! Honest I ain't!"

His voice was like an echo through the dense woods as I put time and distance between us. Then, like a demon out of hell, I heard him shout, a shout which seemed to rend the very trees: "All right then . . . you little whorey runt! I'll kill you then! You half-fruit! You dirty little ass-hole! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

I kept running, the low limbs of the trees slapping me in the face, the blackberry briars tearing my best blazer, my dress slacks, dragging like frightful claws at my every move.

"Wait, Mist' Dewy! Wait!" I heard a voice behind me, and slowing my speed, I turned in time to see Cheka plowing through the brush behind me, leaping as he tried to put on his levi's and run at the same time, stumbling, catching his balance, his shirt under one arm, his brown face the hideous mask of stark terror . . . that unforgetable terror of nightmare.

I halted until he could catch up, and we went on in silence until we came to the highway. We paused behind a Coca Cola sign until he could dress. And all the while, from the deep silence of the woods the voice of Augie sounded like an ill omen of hell.

"I'll never again fool with any white folks . . . as long as I live," Cheka panted, the sweat streaming down his face, his breathing coming in short, gasping labors. "That's the most expensive tail I ever had!"

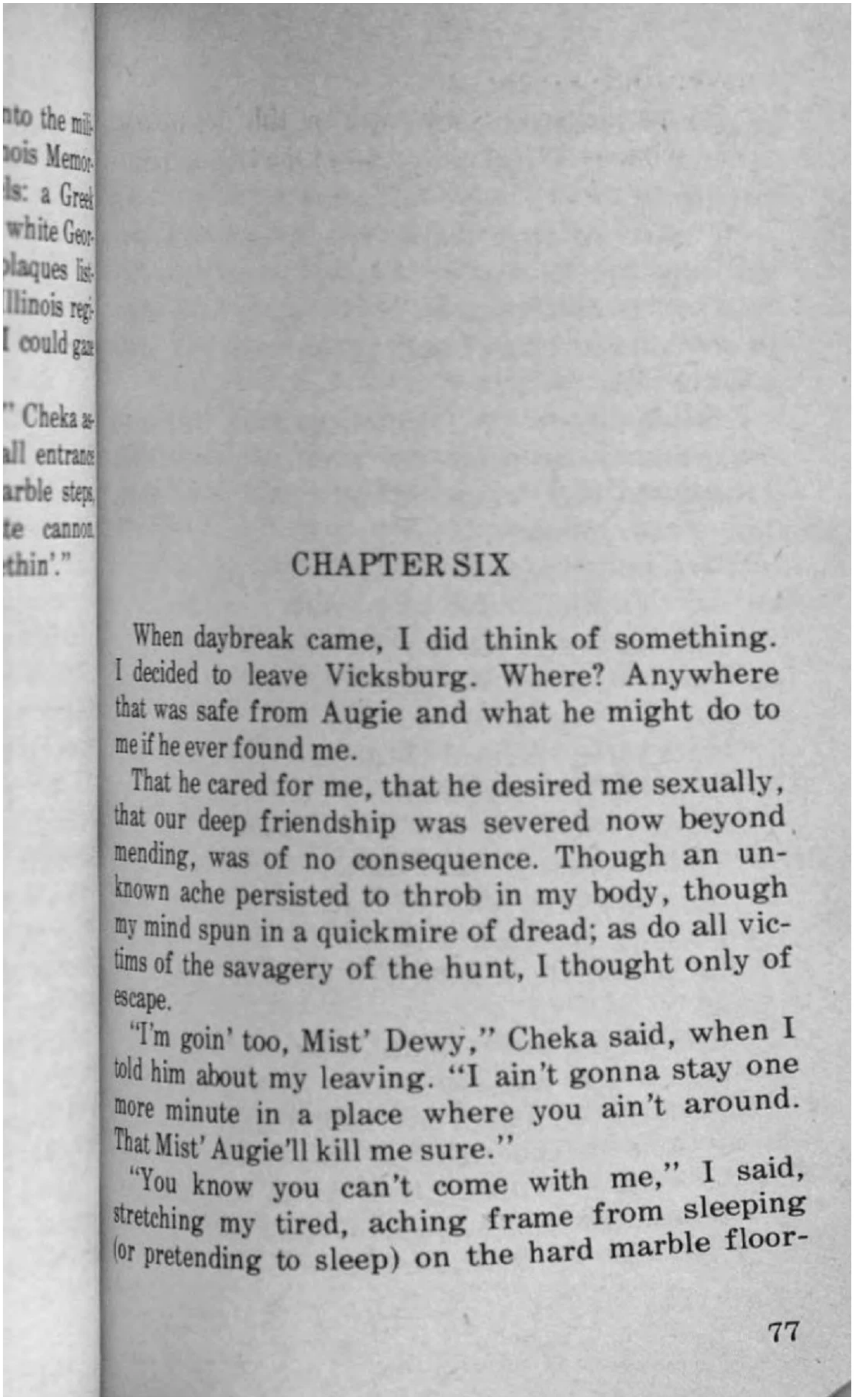
"What are we going to do?" I cried helplessly, aware of Augie's wrath and the damage he could do when he was tempered up. He could lose all his sense of stability. And sharply into my mind came the time he had crushed a boy's head against a stone wall; simply because the boy, a rabbit faced punk, had flipped a cigarette butt between his legs.

"I know what I'm going to do," Cheka answered, his teeth rattling. "I'm gonna make tracks."

"Let's hide in the park," I suggested, after I had caught my breath, had considered our action. "He'll never find us there."

So we picked our way up Fort Hill, i
tary park and slept the night in the Illi
ial. A strange hideaway for two rebe
temple in design, sculptured from snow
gia marble, lined inside with bronze
ing every man who had fought in the I
ments, and domed at the ceiling where
at the stars.

"Don't you worry none, Mist' Dewy,
sured me. He stood guard at the one t
that faced a wide cataract of white m
and was flanked by two Confedera
"When daybreak comes, we think of some



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CHAPTER SIX

When daybreak came, I did think of something. I decided to leave Vicksburg. Where? Anywhere that was safe from Augie and what he might do to me if he ever found me.

That he cared for me, that he desired me sexually, that our deep friendship was severed now beyond mending, was of no consequence. Though an unknown ache persisted to throb in my body, though my mind spun in a quickmire of dread; as do all victims of the savagery of the hunt, I thought only of escape.

"I'm goin' too, Mist' Dewy," Cheka said, when I told him about my leaving. "I ain't gonna stay one more minute in a place where you ain't around. That Mist' Augie'll kill me sure."

"You know you can't come with me," I said, stretching my tired, aching frame from sleeping (or pretending to sleep) on the hard marble floor-

ing. "How can you and I travel together? We
spotted for civil rights workers before we got t
city limits."

"I could be your family servant or somethi
he said, humble before me, his princely ha
gone. "I'd cook for you . . . just let me come,
Dewy, please! I can't stay in this town with
Augie lookin' for me."

I finally agreed. We skirted the woods for h
and when we got there ate a hot meal out o
screened-in back porch. While we ate I told
Nanny everything.

"I can understand the violence of storms, of t
der, of lightning," she said, when I had finis
"For that is as God intended . . . if there is a Go
but I will never be able to understand the viol
of man!"

"Oh, Auntie," I cried bitterly. "It ain't that
I'll write. We'll keep in touch."

"Letters!" she blurted out. "Shadows on
wall! Who wants to read dim, unapproachable
ters? You can't converse with letters, with scrib
on a piece of paper, and you and I always like
get our teeth into a good conversation, tear i
threads."

I stared at my coffee cup. I knew she was sp
ing the truth, as she had always spoken the tr
I would miss our talks, my confiding in her.
was my one defense against the world, my
ally, my initial fount of wisdom: all that was
that was beautiful and wholesome and kind.

"I'll come see you then, Auntie."

Her body slumped, like a wet bag caving in, as if she couldn't wait that long, and her tired old eyes quivered from a pain I would come to know later in my long sojourn with loneliness.

"I cannot stop you," she murmured slowly, dropping her eyes. "But you are going into a savage, violent world, Dewy. I sense it now, this moment. You are already skirting its borders . . . with this perverted Augie . . . with your new friend Cheka." She nodded at him, lowering bars, standards which had not been lowered for a hundred years; and all because of her desperate, eternal love for me. "I hope you are doing the right thing. I hope you know what you want. I had the same trouble with Violet and Laurel once." They stared at her, as they sat on the old ragged couch sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes. "Nature is a stubborn opponent."

I looked at her, her face a map of tiny wrinkles. I could feel the tenseness of this cool, shaded porch; the faces, the pairs of eyes, the non-received symbol before us, merging into our world. Merging not by choice, really, but by absolute necessity.

"You don't understand me," I said to her, eager now to depart, to find some safe retreat before Augie discovered me. "I haven't changed. I'm still Dewy Bow . . . the boy you've always known, Auntie."

"Birds of a feather!" came Mama's husky voice from the kitchen door. She slid out onto the porch in a pair of flat mules, a dark red house coat knotted untidily around her, her hair in curlers, her plump face unpainted. Her eyes were swollen puffs,

her cheeks sagged, and her lips were forml
pinched with tiny crevices, the scars of anxiety
mental strains. "Let him be on his way. Nanny.
him find out how the other half lives, what it's
to work for a living. With the friends he ke
(she glared hotly in Cheka's direction) he'll le
soon enough, then he'll come wagging his cute li
butt back."

Aunt Nanny flinched. Her eyes were stern
Mama's. "You're a hard female, Dela. The boy is
trouble."

"I heard from the bedroom," she said flatly, st
ing through the screen at the rubbish piled up in t
back yard, the old tires, the dilapidated Ford cou
sitting on blocks of wood, the wash house, the d
of chinaberry trees. "Seems to me the only mar
thing to do is stand your ground, fight back. But
she sighed coldly, "you never learned how to fig
like a man, did you, Dewy?"

She made my temper boil. I flipped my cigaret
across the porch. "You should know . . . all abo
men, Duchess!"

She wheeled, glaring at me, her enormous ey
. . . more enormous still without the kind disguise
make-up . . . like the bulging eyes of a frighten
cow. "Don't you ever call me Duchess!"

Cheka and I got up to leave.

Aunt Nanny stood in the screen doorway, he
hands gripping her heart. Behind her stood Mama
her head vainly high, stubbornly aloof. But whe
I pulled back the bucket seat of Laurel's car fo
Cheka to get into the back and slid nonchalantly i

front, Mama cried out to me: "If you need anything, baby, wire!"

"God bless you, child," Aunt Nanny muttered in broken sobs, and I blew her a kiss.

Laurel drove us to the outskirts of town and put us out below the city limits, for it was against the law to thumb a ride within the charter borders. I kissed her good-bye and Cheka and I started on our way.

We felt safer now, with a few miles between us and Augie, and we conversed with less nervous tension. I learned a great deal about Cheka, with nothing to do but talk as we hitch-hiked south, turning to thumb at every car that passed. He told me of his family, his life in the little town of Bovina, just east of Vicksburg, his school, his love for art. He was superior among his race in class, education and ability, and I forgot that he was a negro and about the wide gap in our social equality. Not that I had ever hated negroes. Like so many Southerners, I was kind to them, tolerated them; but skirted any social mixing which could do more harm than good. Now, fear and necessity and a certain understanding had brought Cheka and me together—like war bedfellows—and we managed nicely. His superior manner erased the otherwise impossible breach . . . and we both gained a warmness for the other, a mutual belonging, from that unusual experience with Augie and the consequences of that experience. We both were running from the same thing, and going perhaps into the same something; so feeling this, compromise to race was only natural.

He did not look up to me and I did not look dow to him . . . thanks to Augie for that . . . and ou friendship, springing from the beer line on Satu days was blossoming into full flower.

Too, he never apologized nor did he bring up th subject of his and Augie's sexual experience in m presence; thus made our understanding of the othe all the more complete, valuable. The knowledge that carnal experience made us allies of the grea est quality. Not enemies, to hold that secret as weapon one against the other. It seemed to merg us, to erase the physical reality that he was blac and me white, seemed to be the one key of under standing which made us friends, forgetful of so ciety.

Near Yokena a log truck, empty, its chains rat tling, stopped and picked us up. This was our firs encounter with the obvious breaking of the races the humiliating ostracism imposed on us for traveling as companions: of attempting, through no direct employment of our own, to solidify the races.

“The black boy can ride in back,” the driver said, as I opened the muddy, squeaky door and climbed into the front seat beside him. Obediently, from lifelong habit, Cheka leaped upon the back, and stood up, hanging desperately to the rusty, bent up cab; the wild wind tearing at his bright red shirt, the dust soiling his white jeans.

The driver was a giant of a man, a two-hundred pounder . . . hard of muscle, wiry of arms, enormous of hands, black of hair, about twenty-five: a cross between Clint Walker and James Arness. His huge, animal thighs bulged in tight, oil streaked jeans when he had to change gears, which was often, going up and down the wooded hills, into the valleys of Highway Sixty-one dense with clinging moss; and the veins stood out like ropes along his forearms and biceps when he wrestled with the controls, manipulated the floor shift, the motor growling, spitting, billowing blue smoke.

"My name's Cookland Rieder," he shouted, above the din of the engine. "Everybody calls me Cookie for short."

I told him mine.

"Sounds like a movie star's."

With this he gained twenty points with me. I turned and looked at him, actually, for the first time; saw his profile framed against the dim, shadowy, passing trees: his black hair combed neatly back, the stern cut of his cheekbones, his nose. His protruding chin was gray from a heavy beard, shaved twice daily I was certain, if he was to avoid that four o'clock shadow. It was a rugged face, primeval, savagely beautiful; like a face sculptured in bronze, immobile. His deep blue eyes were set attentively on the road, his lips thrust out, outlined clearly, thick, expressive.

"Who's your buddy?" he asked, turning and smiling a winning smile. God! But he was handsome.

"From an old family of servants," I lied, and I went on with my prevarication, drawing from my source of old Civil War books I had read. "They still feel they belong to our family, body and soul."

"Southern aristocrats, huh?" he added, smiling again, this time displaying animal white teeth. "And all the time I figured you two out to be civil rights demonstrators."

"I don't march for no cause," I explained, my voice loud. "Except for me. That is the only cause I know."

"That's about the best way to keep it, I think. I don't dig all these mass demonstrations, this roustering out of police, this keeping the towns and cities in an uproar, scaring the people, both blacks and whites to death. If everybody just works, minding his own business; then in time, the races will eventually merge, and all people in the South will live and work together."

"What the negro needs is a better education," I said, defending Cheka more than the race itself. "Then he will be given better jobs, his living conditions will improve, and socially he will be more qualified to merge with the rest of society."

"Well, so much for the problems of the world," he said, grinning round at me, his steady, beaded eyes like a lion's. "Where you two boys headed?"

"Anywhere . . . we can find work," I answered reluctantly, for we were not imparted upon a definite route, nor goal. We were just running from Augie, and his murderous fury over his dunked motorcycle; running perhaps, from life itself, the brutal, vivid, harsh realities . . . things we could not face up to: the awesome callousness of people, the hemmed in corrals of the flesh, the lusts over which we had no control . . . just running somewhere to safety, to a make-shift semblance of peace.

"I work at a sawmill west of Port Gibson, near the river and the Natchez trace," he shouted and with genuine concern. "I'm sure the boss can find you something to do. It'll be hard work though, not much pay, but good grub and a roof over your head."

"I don't care how hard the work is," I muttered gravely, thinking that at least it would be a hiding place from Augie.

He looked at me, his eyes blazing with interest.

"Want to come along?"

"Sure . . . I'll give it a go!"

"That's the spirit," he said, slapping me on the thigh.

We went the rest of the way in silence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam Gallagar's sawmill lay sprawled upon a cleared hill overlooking the river. With its numerous rows of clapboard shacks, white tents, mills with their tall stacks constantly smoking, gargantuan piles of sawdust, mess hall and storehouses, it resembled the encampment of an army. Constantly in the air was the smell of cut pine, of resin, of smoke, of dry leaves burning, of mulch, of sweat, of dung; and that forever steaming, hot smell where trees and underbrush have been felled, where the sun has parched the leaves, dry, brittle, blanketed with feverish heat, smoke and ruin.

Mules, hundreds of them, used to pull the huge pine logs from the dense wooded areas, swarmed the paddocks, inviting flies, their honking at mealtimes like the sounds of multitudinous birds. And around them was the smell of hair and sweetfeed, of stagnate water, of acid wine, of sweaty harness.

An encampment without women!

"Put one fat whore in a camp with a hundred men and you have ruined a hundred good workers," said Sam Gallegar when first Cheka and I had an interview with him. "When my contract is up, they can sleep with two at a time, for all I give a damn, but until then . . ."

He was a robust, pot-bellied man, bald as an eagle, a cigar stuck out of his sagging lips, blowing two columnes of smoke like a charging bull; a typical Simon Legree. But he was honest, worked like a titan, and was fair with his men, provided they worked hard and obeyed him.

He put me and Cheka in the messhall, waiting on the long roughly hewn tables, washing dishes, and keeping the garbage emptied, and while these men ate, laughed, bellowed, complained, (the dining hall was a melting pot for gossip) there were rumors of dire whippings of negroes, some disappearing in the river, of maltreatments that went on: penalties, punishments, deprivations; as though the place were a prison.

In fact, life was carried on in very much the same manner there as in prison. The men, black and white working side by side, eating together, washing up together in the river at night, bunking together, were a rough, callous lot, prone to cursing, drinking. They were hard, morose, embittered; toiling as if that toil were the most despised thing in the world, as if this camp were the most loathed place in their lives.

At night, under a ring of kerosene lamps, they sat and played cards, drank, smoked, cursed, discussed women, complained about their sexual hungers, joked about cornholing and blow jobs.

Because I was small, and the youngest male in camp, (and the best looking I might add, for I had always been very serious about my neatness, my physical appearance), they took a shine to me.

In time, I became the target of their slightly coarse affection. They pinched me fondly, embraced me, joked with me, kiddingly asked me for dates, swore they were going to seduce me if they ever got me alone, and catered to my every whim.

Actually, they petted me.

Away from their wives, their girls, their favorite whores, they turned to me in their isolation.

I did not learn until then that men, all men, from every walk of life, demand something to tease, to pursue, to gloat over, to fondle. They must exercise their guile at love-making, and whet their romantic inclinations on whatever, whoever is available.

Both annoyed and flattered, I accepted their attention in good humor, for I profoundly believed they were only joking, making light of something serious; and in turn I kidded back. I had a long line of bright, cute sayings I had picked up from the streets in Vicksburg, in Mama's Sea Shell bar, from the movies and books which I had remembered. They came easy to me and, if spoken at the right time and to the right person, they brought the house down. I seemed to bring out the humor in these sex-starved men, who swapped humor in exchange for wanton desires; and many of them, especially the older, more embittered ones, went out of their way to administer small favors for me, and actually sought me out in what readily could be called light flirtations.

I would come to learn of this outlet in men in later years to come, in other towns, in other Southern cities; come to instinctively recognize what I now could only innocently guess.

Men alone, men hungry for female companionship, men impulsive to display the romantic side to their nature, men anxious to put other men down by their own conquering attitudes, men with that aloneness never quite fulfilled, men who drank and sought the images of their intoxicated dreams, men who would basically agree to sexual intercourse with anyone--anything--merely to satisfy their lusts, men who only wanted a companion.

All these qualities, or lack of them, I came to learn and recognize in these rough, callous laborors, these suntanned men whose skin resembled leather; who bore on their bodies scars from runaway saws, sharp limbs, falling trees, burns; hard men, hard of body, of muscle; embittered for their lack of education, their doom to this common livelihood; some with age creeping up on them, dreadful of the time when their crippled bodies could no longer endure the hardships; dreadful of the cold, the rains, the aching bones, the ruin from dissipation.

Many, like Cookie Rieder, were young. These--playful, energetic, anxious to burn out their vital inner flames, their reckless impulses--actually pursued me seriously . . . some even dared to attempt making light love to me.

Had they regarded me as a girl, a female, I would have been both outraged and embarrassed. But they looked on me as a "cute boy," young, glowing, clean, a body . . . something more beautiful than themselves or this camp; something which took their minds off their work, which reminded them . . . and so obviously, of their own uncouthness. So I came to tolerate, actually to enjoy, their casual advances; concluding that they were no more serious than that. Their attention took much of the strain out of the work. It became fun serving them at the long tables, coming back with words in answer to their challenges, ignoring their charades, dodging their playful, groping hands.

Next to the dining hall was a recreation hall, or "bull pen" they called it. It was filled with tables and chairs, like in the old Western movie saloons, and a crude bar and a make-shift stage. At one end was a juke-box. and the place really jumped on Friday and Saturday nights. Everyone got hopelessly drunk. and the place always looked like it was on fire. with the cigar and cigarette smoke oozing through the clapboard cracks and the primitive windows..windows with no screens, with hinged shutters propped up with sticks.

Sometimes amateurs performed, anyone with any talent at all. and hardly a week went by that someone, black or white, did not put on a performance. Guitar strummers, french harp players, banjo trios, buck and wing dancers, trick artists, comedians, acrobats, card sharps, magicians, negro minstrels, dog acts; anything to draw a crowd, to get a laugh, a noticeable response. Many, for the fun of it, were booed, stoned with wild plums and mock oranges, harrassed by the drunks: all of which contributed to the hilarious merriment, the drunken child-orgies.

Cookie Reider and I shared one of the clapboard shacks, while Cheka bunked in with a young negro mule-skinner. It was Cookie who, on one night coming up from New Orleans where he had carried a load of logs to a paper refinery at Covington, Louisiana, sold me on the idea of doing a dance in women's attire.

It didn't take much selling. I bit at the idea like a catfish at a worm. But I tried to sound objective: "I'm not that kind," I stammered, staring at him from across the two bunks; his dark, swarthy face was golden under the wall lamp. "I'm not a sissy, Cookie."

"Who said you were?" he said, his blue eyes twinkling. "It's all a joke, and they'll go for you like soldiers go for Bette Grable."

"But what will I wear? What will I do?" I cried, protesting, though already ideas were forming in my brain: visions of me in a dancing costume, acting out the role of woman, in front of these hard-bitten men.

"I'll bring you back something from Port Gibson," he rambled on. "You're perfect for it..your small body. You won't even have to shave your arms and legs..like those fruits at the Silk and Feather in New Orleans...and your hair..."

"Where?" I interrupted him, a completely new interest stirring.

"The Silk and Feather. Boys deck out like girls."

"You go to such places?" I asked dumbfounded, taken back at the surprise of all surprises. There was no understanding men.

He shrugged flipping his cigarette ashes on the rough pine planked floor; then leaned back on one elbow, his naked feet thrust up on the side of his bunk. I noticed his feet, the hair-covered toes, the trim ankle, the beginning of thick black hair on his legs, the shapeliness, the primitive strength. I had always admired men's feet, if they looked like Cookie's.

"I go for the kicks, I guess. Kinda like to see them kids coming out like girls. Some of them are beautiful . . . more beautiful than any woman. A woman is half a sex. A man is half a sex, but that way they are a whole sex."

I remember this, and this wonderful understanding quality about him. I remember too, and have come to cherish always his comment about me after I had completed my first dance in female attire.

He said: "What--when drunk--I see in other women, I see in you sober."

The most flattering thing anyone has ever said about me, to date.

"Will the men think it queer?" I questioned him,

my refusal wearing thin to the point of acce
"Naw!" he said, and his eyes looked on mi
"Would you do it, Dewy, for me . . . please

With that look, how could I refuse Cooki
thing? He drove me into Port Gibson, took
cafe for a meal. I bought the articles for
tume. I had seen a movie once called Salome
decided to dress as much like that heroine as
ble, and to do a similar dance. So I selected
ber of long streamers of sequins, about ten
colored women's scarves, several junk pie
jewelry, a handful of beads, dangling ear-
scads of bright slave-bracelets, and a jockey
which I would later cut down. Cookie seem
get a kick out of helping me select the ma
and though the clerks gave us funny look
didn't mind. In fact, we had a lot of fun over i

Since Cheka was an artist of sorts, he
me make up my face the night of my perform
and I swept my dark hair in front, with
french curls and bangs.

With the streamers of sequins stitched t
jockey strap, heightened by the long scarves t
by one corner...which I would discard one
time...a sequined bra, my accumulation of junk
and bracelets, my small dark body all but n
I did resemble a teen-aged Salome, strik
much like Gina Lollobrigida: the working m
for most male transvestites...though I did not r
this then.

So the following Friday night, with the juk
pounding to the rhythmic "I want Candy," I

into my dance.

The hall was packed, butt to crotch (I give Cookie credit for this, his verbal advertising) and the silence was so acute when I came out on stage, in the magic golden glow of the kerosene lamps placed on the floor, you could hear a pin drop.

One by one I dropped a scarf, leaving a multicolored trail as I moved my body, pivoting my hips, thrusting up a leg, my arms encircled above my head; my whole being melting into the role I played out before these dark piercing eyes, these wanton exiles, these animals with men's bodies, these lurking, lustful fans who would, in part, fire my star into ascendance. And I knew at this instant, under those dim, amber lights, keyed to the sound of the thundering juke-box, that I was an artist at this, that I was in my limbo of life, that the supreme glory, and the supreme tragedy of this art was for me the only reality. I knew too at this moment on stage that the figures of men and women, the events of everyday existence, would but move about me, shadowy, insubstantial; that only when I breathed a life into a part, clothed with my own flesh and blood the concept of the female which I had conjured, that I myself would be fully awake, fully alive. And when I dropped the last veil, standing before these glaring men, my small body almost naked, the entire hall vibrated. Yells and cheers resounded, heightened with whistles, cat calls. Hats and caps sailed into the air, fell on the stage, came down around me.

I brought the house down.

That night, back in my bunk house, when I discarding my jockey strap and my sequined and lay down naked, exhausted on my bunk, tired to move yet too excited to sleep, Co slipped in beside me.

"God! You were wonderful, Dewey," he whispe close to my ear, his huge, hard arms pulling close in a warm bear hug and strangely, I coul resist.

At his mere touch, maddeningly, the key being unlocked. The door unlatched, swung op the door I had promised myself I would k locked and barred forever

His hard dark body, naked except for a cover of coarse black hair, eased up and over me, sen ous as only a true man can ever be, demand with his ardor what I must give, conquering by his hot lips sliding along the back of my ne over my ear, and even then I knew, as a migh force of nature under which you cow helplessly a can do nothing but endure its awesome w I knew he was going to have me, that he wo take me however he willed, and that I could nothing but let him take me

"I want you," he murmured, his breath comi in short, panting gasps. "I gotta have you, Dev got to!"

Remembrance of Augie, and those same tanta ing words came back to haunt me, frightening as on that long gone day in the showers wh Augie had come on strong with me and had scar me out of my wits. But now I was corner brought to bay like a wild animal, and by a wilder animal still, powerless to resist, to fight back, for he was more powerful than I, more demanding, more domineering. His hot lips, his moist tongue, his groping body and huge strong hands struggled with all my reserves, tore them to useless shreds.

"But I've never done--er--anything like this," I let out a protest, fearing yet not fearing, glorified by his manly weight on my frail body, his masterful impulses. "Please...don't hurt me!"

"Just relax," he instructed, running a huge hand the length of my spine and squeezing my buttocks. Oddly I obeyed, as if it were the voice of God and not Cookie's which sounded so close to my ear. A voice willing that I obey, a voice that promised ecstasies in the mad flavor of its tone.

Then, I felt his enormous organ slide in between my legs, felt the wild forest of hair, his seeds, like swollen melons, and in an instant more, as he gored me, I felt and sensed everything that was beautiful in man, his dark power, his strength, his sense of coercion, male from the far flung past, the hairy man of the caves taking his sexual thrill, or the man somewhere in the far-flung future doing the mating will of his gods.

Shamefully, as his savage body worked itself into a frenzy on top of my body, his huge arms entangled about my neck, my shoulders, I lay and gloried in his sweat-filled madness, thrilled to his hard.

I was his, to have and to hold as he wanted me. He smothered me in his huge arms, arms burned from the Southern sun and a breeze from the fragrant with pine sap and smoke. He lift dark hair from his fevered brow and said lo gathering me forever into his enormous hear

“Woman is part sex. Man is part sex, but a whole sex, for you are both.”

“I'm ashamed,” I whispered, feeling both and heavenly bliss in his wild, savage arms.

“Don't be,” he assured, stroking my brow, ing my eyes, my nose, my mouth. “You were as a playhouse for my prick, and you are now, understand?”

I nodded, sinking deeper into his arms, had a wild notion now that I had been wrong Augie, and that he had been right about me tears that wet my cheeks now were not fro pain from Cookie's laboring thrusts, but fro own loss . . . my loss of dear, wonderful Augie

CHAPTER EIGHT

Life for me in this drab, primitive encampment, became an earthly paradise.

The motley crew: sawmen, axemen, tree monkeys, lathermen, men who operated turning lathes, the bark rippers, the boilermen, the cooks, the corralmen, the mule-skinners, all demanded with an air of genuine admiration that I dance nightly at the "Bull Pen," a task which placed me on cloud nine, and one I did not have the courage to refuse.

Here, the chance presented itself for that which I had mentally trained myself since high school days . . . still earlier, back when I was eight or nine, masquerading in my sisters' cast-off clothes. I was a natural. Some inner, instinctive quality, inborn, in-bred, like that of an artist, a musician, a poet, and one over which I had little if any control, immediately became active within every fiber of my small body, stirring my heart, stimulating my

mind. Why I desired to play out the role of
opposite sex I could not fathom, not then; ar
lured me with a force too great for me to ref
to ponder. I was having too much fun to pu
an abstraction.

Later, it would be different.

With Cheka supervising my costumes, hel
me with my make-up...later I would never
make-up, but here I was compelled to do so in o
to bring out a certain brand of woman, the l
these callous roughnecks desired...watching m
I rehearsed, smoothing out my movements, sch
ing me in the dance, I conditioned myself amaz
ly. I put everything I had into the part, live
breathed it. No actor on the stage or screen pu
much emphasis into a character role as I did
guising myself as a ballroom trollop...that ov
painted, slovenly woman these case-harde
roustabouts craved, drooled over, became sod
drunk.

Though it was not the role I craved to play ba
ally, it was decidedly good training; and whi
danced, while I gauged my audience, their r
tions, I learned, remembered. In order to progre
recalled too, every musical movie I had ever se
so that I might borrow the dances, the costum
the techniques. Kismet, the King of Kings,
Golden Follies, The Garden of Allah, The Ten C
mandments, David and Bathsheba, The Egypti
and many others. My one drawback was cloth
but Cheka and I pooled our skills, made use of w
we had, what we could paint or cut or stitch,

purchase from the little country stores in Port Gibson or Lorman. And a new theatrical team was born out of our labors, amid this backwoods camp ...me the actor, or actress and Cheka my body servant, my tailor, my art director.

Despite the crude reality . . . crude because I did not want to accept the idea . . . the men acquired a new interest in me; not the joking, jubilant relation which they had carried on with mock relish before my first dance, but one with sexual overtones. Where once they had only kidded about such things, they now openly pursued me; and because they could not have me, they oftentimes became wildly drunk.

It was a cat-at-a-mouse-hole deal everywhere I went about the camp, and the eyes that followed me were lit with sex hunger, cravings beyond my true nature..beyond theirs actually...and I sensed something of danger mixed with male desire, which both thrilled and terrified me. I had not minded their jokes, sometimes vile, boisterous, misleading; had tolerated their behind pinching, their groping hands, their romantic advances; for then they were only making whimsical jokes, were only killing time, making the most of their sordid situation. But now they meant what they said, were grim, somber about their advances; were uncontrollable when they put their arms around my shoulders, tried vainly to kiss me, to lure me off to their bunkhouses for the night. They promised ecstasies, brought me small, inexpensive gifts when they had to go into Port Gibson for supplies. They

tried to beguile me into going swimming with
in the Mississippi River, for a walk in the woo
picnic on the sandbars, a ride in their dugout b
for a load of logs on their truck, a joy ride on
sweaty mules. At the "Bull Pen," after my d
they jockeyed to see whose table I would occ
bought me drinks and cigarettes, begged m
dance with them...which I refused...played sp
numbers for me on the juke-box all maneuve
for one and toward one objective...that I ex
my role of woman beyond the footlights.

Only Cookie Rieder had that honor.

Why I will never quite know, nor come to f
realize. One day we were one thing to each ot
the next entirely something else. And it all h
pened so naturally, as though that were the wa
should be. In looking back in both sad and asha
reprieve, I wonder how I had shed my standa
my convictions, my deep urge to hang onto m
hood, so casually; as if I would no longer n
them nor use them; as if, through Cookie's ma
maneuvers, they finally lost their value.

Perhaps, and I prefer this to any other solut
it was his overly masculine ego, his primitive s
agery, his male personality, his dominance s
ually, that lured me into finding his so utte
valuable to me; and everything else so incon
quential, so drab, so unimportant. Too, we ne
discussed the subject. For him it seemed
appetite that must be filled, an administering
the whims of his body; and he took me whene
he wanted me, and it came as a thing for us b

so naturally that neither of us considered that it needed a verbal comment.

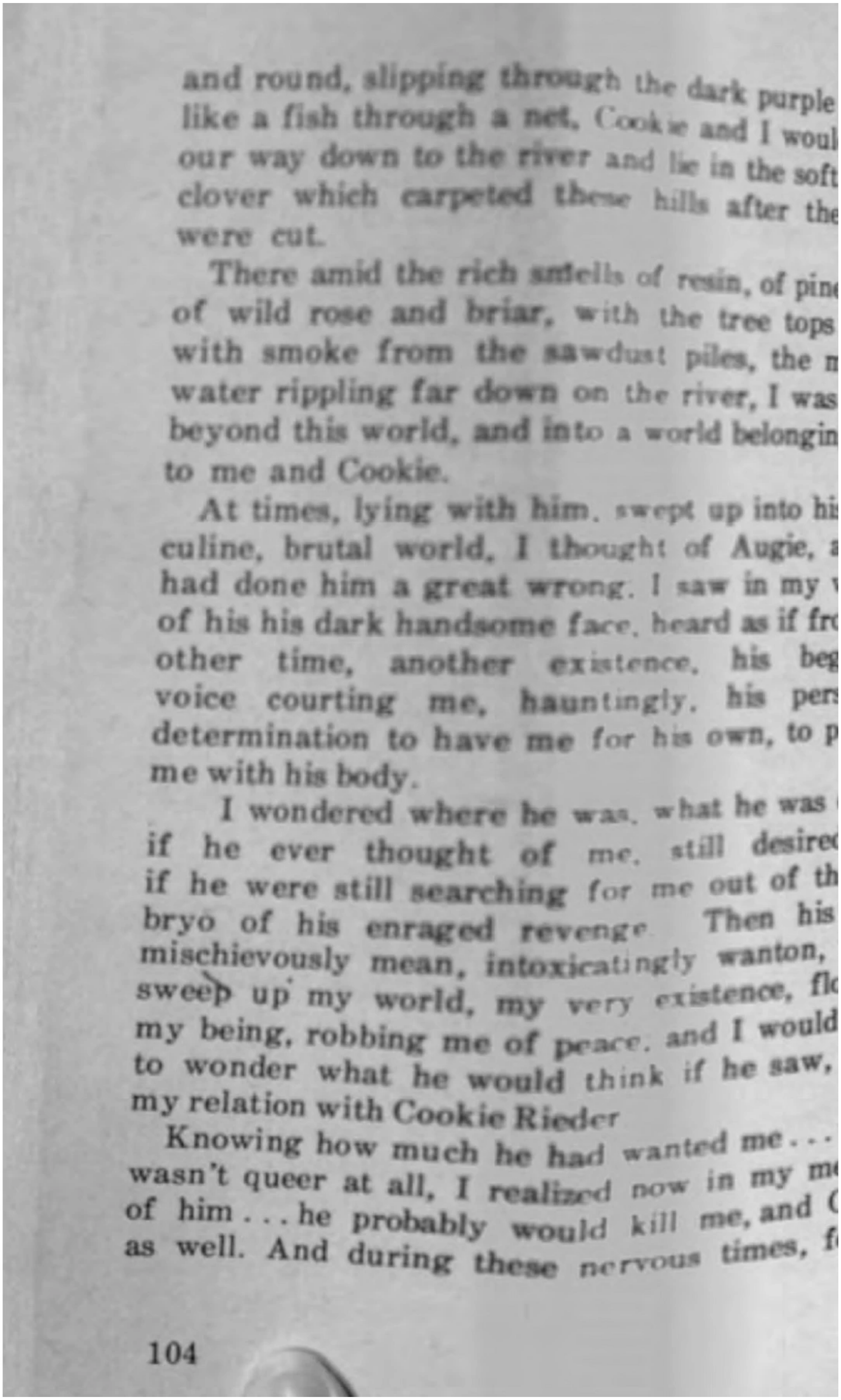
At first, after my initial performance, I brooded about it, said to myself a thousand times that it would never happen again. But it did happen, automatically, each time he slipped down his jeans in the little lamplit shack and eased into the bunk beside me. And, mercifully, it didn't seem fruity, or queer, or in any way odd: not like the limp wristed set, the hip swishers, the glass eyed fops who had in Vicksburg provoked my loathing for all of that type.

I broke away completely from my old world, my high school brand of friends. Moral values, the standards I had set for myself, the things I had projected out ahead as my goals no longer held any great prominence for me..with the exception of my acting.

This was a new world, a new environment, and Cookie Rieder, set down into this primitive realm, a part of it all, helped greatly to make it tolerable; in fact, increased the splendor of it.

I still persisted in regarding both him and myself as normal men, with male desires, male responses, male reactions. Though I dwelled at times on what my Aunt had told me . . . that the first time you commit a wrong it is the most difficult, then becomes less wrong as you commit them again and again . . . my relationship with Cookie seemed to fit into place comfortably a passion without artifice.

Sometimes at night, when it was too hot in the bunkhouse to sleep, and the moon was out, full



and round, slipping through the dark purple
like a fish through a net. Cookie and I woul
our way down to the river and lie in the soft
clover which carpeted these hills after the
were cut.

There amid the rich smells of resin, of pin
of wild rose and briar, with the tree tops
with smoke from the sawdust piles, the m
water rippling far down on the river, I was
beyond this world, and into a world belongin
to me and Cookie.

At times, lying with him, swept up into his
culine, brutal world, I thought of Augie, a
had done him a great wrong. I saw in my
of his his dark handsome face, heard as if fro
other time, another existence, his beg
voice courting me, hauntingly, his pers
determination to have me for his own, to p
me with his body.

I wondered where he was, what he was
if he ever thought of me, still desired
if he were still searching for me out of th
bryo of his enraged revenge. Then his
mischievously mean, intoxicatingly wanton,
sweep up my world, my very existence, flo
my being, robbing me of peace, and I would
to wonder what he would think if he saw,
my relation with Cookie Rieder

Knowing how much he had wanted me . . .
wasn't queer at all, I realized now in my m
of him . . . he probably would kill me, and
as well. And during these nervous times, f

Cookie's hard, veined arms, his brood shoulders, his thick, hairy thighs, I felt safe, felt I had his protection, his physical strength as a sword and shield between me and Augie's thwarted wrath.

As the hot, limpit somnolence of mid-summer moved on into fall, the men became feverish, restless, prone to swearing, drunkness, profanity. Soon the camp would break up for the winter, the men would return to their wives or mistresses, and an anxiety invaded the encampment: a stirring limbo bordering on danger, rebellion.

I was the first to notice it, their eyes now peered at me with wanton maliciousness; and one night when a drunken, sodden bark stripper dragged me into the woods, he and Cookie got into a fist fight. Sam Gallegar called it quits on my dancing. He had never catered to the idea in the first place, but he owned the Bull Pen, and my female impersonations as a drawing card had put extra dollars in his pocket; so he had tolerated it for that one reason and no other.

After the fight, he put his thumbs down.

"It's against nature," he bellowed summoning his only excuse.

"A boy baring his behind like a woman. Besides, the men will be leaving anyway, and as soon as we break camp you're washed up!"

"Through...hell!" Cookie fumed that night in the bunkhouse when I told him what Gallegar had said. "You could knock them cold at the Silk and Feather club in New Orleans. I know. I've seen them putting on their show, and you can spot them as men a mile away."

"I'm afraid my technique would be cru
pared to them--professionals," I argued,
full well that I had lived, acted, existed in
of maleness all my life, up until I had co
encampment. I was new at the trade, an
profoundly. I still had a lot to learn, h
hours more of training before I could com
professional dancers, professional singers
sional female impersonators. I was yet
only a few months before ripping all over
with Augie on a motorcycle, going out w
living it up in clubs and dives and flauntin
vious masculinity on the streets. Even the
terrified me.

"You got them all beat," Cookie insiste
me the once over with his cornflower bl
"Them batty freaks! You're clean, fresh, i
Hell, I know the owner of the place. His ey
pop out at the sight of you. I bet you my n
check he'd hire you without even seeing you
What do you say?"

"Well, I've got to do something after th
gar," I answered, without giving it much t
"I could buy better clothes, make my act
Silks, satins, furs, like a wealthy girl woul
not like some two bit trollop."

"You're jam the way you are," Cookie fl
slapping me on the behind. "I'll drive y
Cheka down in my truck, help you get started.

I turned and stared at him sadly, my heart,
leaping to my throat. The breaking up of

would be our breaking up too. I had not given it thought before, but now it hovered persistently, threatening to master me.

"Then...then it will be good bye for us," I stammered, seeing in a dark vision our short life together. I had taken it for granted that it would go on forever...that I would always have him as I had him now.

"Naw, Dewy!" he said, his voice primed with passion, his deeply serious eyes burning into mine. "I'll come see you every chance I get...honest. I wouldn't give up what you got for all the women in the world...including Hedy Lamar."

This was the first time we had talked like this, about our relationship, how we felt for one another; and it sounded so wonderful, like a tonic actually, to hear him put it into words.

So I carefully packed my things: jeans, black boots, leather jacket with studded epaulettes, my Tom Jones shirts, my hip-huggers, my Dutch boy cap, my countdown sweater and visored helmet, my denim leisure short coat; and with Cheka seated up front in the cab with us and not in the rear as on that first day...we three headed for New Orleans.

I left my female costumes behind in the bunkhouse: the gaudy relics of my existence in this pine-smelling, sawdust-burning lumber camp...my legacy to these sanguine roustabouts, these lascivious angels who had launched me on my subsequent career.

CHAPTER NINE

The Silk and Feather Club was the most sumptuous theatre I had ever entered, a setting like one of the burlesque palaces from the movie Diamond Jim. It was located in the square of Bourbon Street and Toulouse, several blocks northwest of the St. Louis Cathedral, in the very heart of the Vieux Carre.

The audience section was occupied with tiny round tables made of tinted blue glass, encrusted with rosebuds, and surrounded with swivel seats of persimmon plastic. The side walls flanking the audience were papered with emerald, striped with gold leaf filigree. The low stage jutted out in a half-moon bordered with foot lights and reflectors., bringing the audience in as well as taking the performers out. In addition to this, a narrow catwalk extended from center stage, and was floored entirely with frosted glass from which multico bulbs burned in gorgeous profusion. The back on stage, the draw curtain, and the panels flar both sides of the wings, were also fabricate emerald with filigree; and rear center an entr way was gained by silver spiraled stairs.

It was breathtaking to me, and to Cheka, a followed Cookie down the vacant aisles, a stage to a little plush office in the rear. An I went, I wondered how Cookie, a truck dr knew so much about a place like this, had i ence with the owner; until I stopped to con his good looks, his virile masculinity. A ting jealousy unnerved me at this possibility, a noticed how elegant he looked in a dark suit flashing white shirt and tie . . . I had never him dressed . . . and the swarthiness of his r ner, the dash of his every gesture.

The owner was a midget Sidney Greenstreet spilled over his deeply carved mahogany sw chair, dwarfed by an enormous desk the siz a pool table , and that was covered with a pi the exact tone of gas chamber green. His tiny b ed eyes, resting on me the moment I entered room, continued to burn on me like solder irons as long as I remained. They sparkled mer and gave him an even more cherubic look his double chin, his sagging pink cheeks, his truding lower lip.

“Mr. Rieder has been telling me about you,” said kindly, fondling his hands, one on the ot as he gazed at me: as if he could undress me his eyes. "Some wonderful things, I might add. Indeed wonderful! By your appearance I would think you would make a more suitable trapeze artist than an impersonator of the felines, but. . . he shrugged. "You're fresh, clean, radiant, and young . . . a far cry better than the hussies I presently employ."

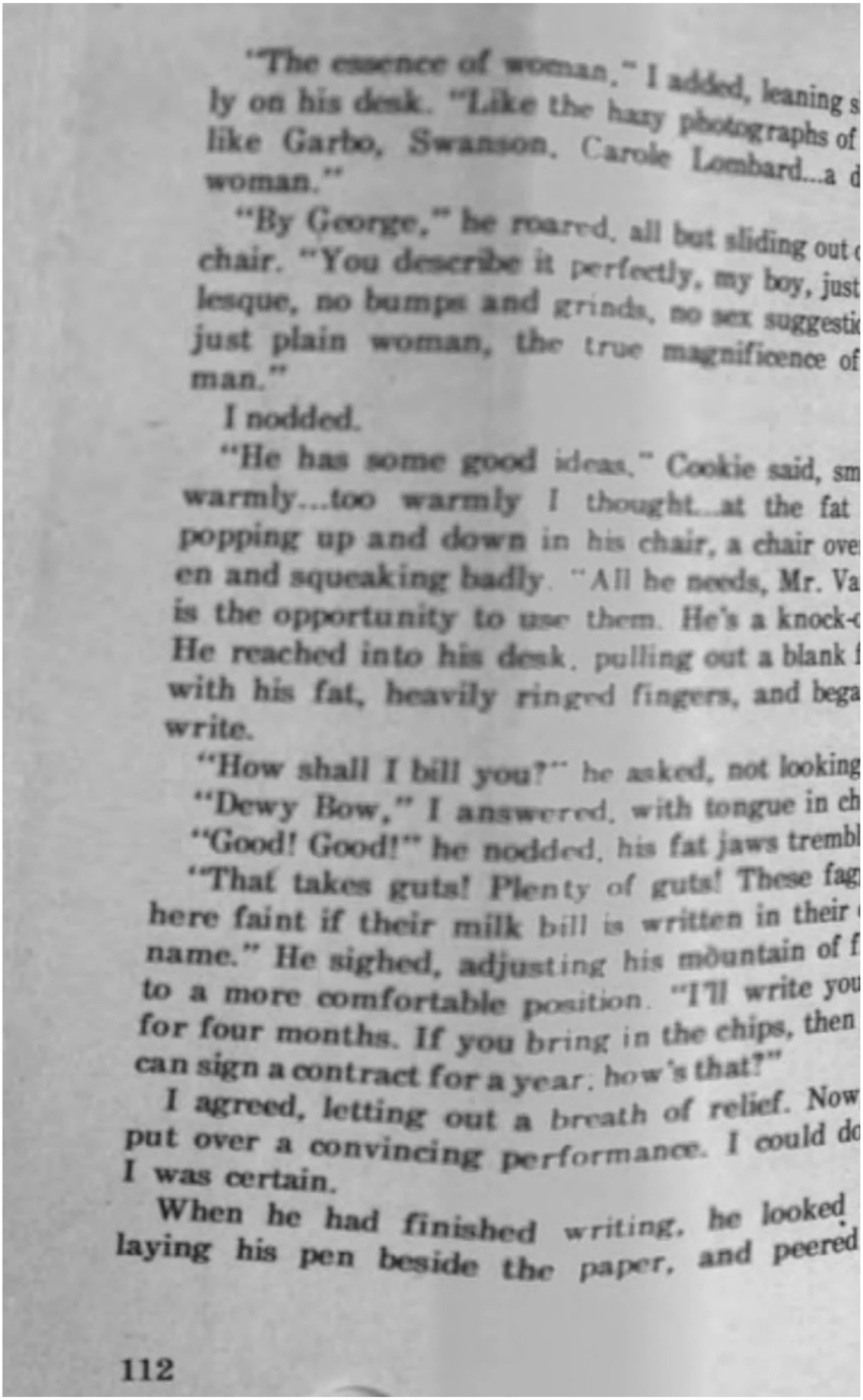
"I thought you would like him," Cookie beamed, looking first at the fat man then at me.

"Like him is hardly the word," the fat man said, leaning back in his swivel chair to survey me further. He instructed me to turn around, to pivot, to walk across the thickly carpeted floor.

He asked pleasantly, blowing two streams of smoke out his flaring nostrils: "What kind of presentation do you have in mine?"

I did not have to think, for I had turned ideas over and over in my mind, had discussed them with Cookie and Cheka all the way from Port Gibson. "A take-off on Jean Harlow," I answered keeping my small body purposely rigid, my hands on my hips butch fashion, my legs spread apart: the stance of the genuine male. I did not want to wander into any female gesture I might later employ on the stage. "Not her actually," I went on to explain, "but with something in white, with white hair. I think it will accent my complexion, my darkness, that wholesome look that I try to achieve."

"Good! Splendid!" he applauded, bouncing in his formlessness of loose fat, like jello in a bowl. "I'm sick to my ass of these campy faggots trying to shake it like a true woman!"



"The essence of woman," I added, leaning s
ly on his desk. "Like the hazy photographs of
like Garbo, Swanson, Carole Lombard...a d
woman."

"By George," he roared, all but sliding out c
chair. "You describe it perfectly, my boy, just
lesque, no bumps and grinds, no sex suggestio
just plain woman, the true magnificence of
man."

I nodded.

"He has some good ideas," Cookie said, sm
warmly...too warmly I thought...at the fat
popping up and down in his chair, a chair ove
en and squeaking badly. "All he needs, Mr. Va
is the opportunity to use them. He's a knock-c
He reached into his desk, pulling out a blank f
with his fat, heavily ringed fingers, and bega
write.

"How shall I bill you?" he asked, not looking

"Dewy Bow," I answered, with tongue in ch

"Good! Good!" he nodded, his fat jaws trembl
"That takes guts! Plenty of guts! These fag
here faint if their milk bill is written in their
name." He sighed, adjusting his mountain of f
to a more comfortable position. "I'll write you
for four months. If you bring in the chips, then
can sign a contract for a year; how's that?"

I agreed, letting out a breath of relief. Now
put over a convincing performance. I could do
I was certain.

When he had finished writing, he looked
laying his pen beside the paper, and peered

Cheka, who had remained a silent sentinel near the entrance.

"Who is your mauve cavalier?" he asked, leaning so that he could motion to Cheka. "Come on in, boy. The Civil War's over!"

Cheka ventured into the room, stood next to me.

"He helps me with my clothes, my dancing, my person," I answered, keeping my reserve.

"A personal valet," the fat man said, bringing his hands together beneath his chin as if to pray. "You travel in style, like a true artist. I like that. Aristocratic. Makes a good impression. Mysterious. I suppose now that you want me to employ him too?"

"If you will, sir," I said, looking at Cheka with approval. "He is valuable for my work, indispensable, and he will work cheap."

He studied for a tense moment, gauging us both. "I will make him a doorman, been needing one for quite a while now, adds class to the joint. He can help you on the side."

I asked before I thought: "What about a place for us to stay?"

"Look at him, Mr. Rieder," the fat man laughed, pointing with a chubby, outstretched hand, his cigar making a fire trail. "Been hired for only five minutes and already he's demanding..like a star. "Well," he shrugged smacking his lips. "There is a vacancy at the Pontalba buildings overlooking Jackson Square. The most sought after apartments in town. Every Yankee north of the Mason and Dixon line is clamoring for one. They've

got that old Southern atmosphere. Been hol
it for an aunt of mine, but it doesn't look like s
gonna show. Spends half her time in Bermuda."
pointed a finger at Cheka "But you can't
there. People here are still funny about s
things. But don't get me wrong; it'd be fine
me, 'cause I think we're all brothers...or siste
He giggled. "I don't care if you're a negro, a
latto, a quadroon, or a half-caste Creole; there
certain things which aren't tolerated, even am
my patrons...who have lifted the color barrier m
than most, I dare say."" He was silent for a mom
as if undecided whether to go on. Then he poi
his cigar at me.

"Now for the rules: First, don't ever wear fe
attire on the streets. The cops will bust you.
be fined, and it will give the place a bad re
tation, like some of those other nelly joints
allow their..er "girls" to do as they please. Sec
don't have any callers in the dressing room. I
to throw out two about a month ago makin
in the toilet. Admirers, fans, can speak to
at the stage door, get your autograph. And th
never..never come down into the audience w
the show is over and fraternize with my patro
makes the place look like a bordello." He slam
his fat hands down on the desk "Well, gentlem
that about wraps it up."

We three were overjoyed We located the apa
ment, brought in my things, dolled the place
then found Çheka a small room and bath east
the French Quarter on St. Philip street. Coo

stayed the night with me, and we celebrated by touring the Vieux Carre, stopping at Napoleon House. We had supper at the Roosevelt, had a drink at Pat O'Briens, one at The Red Devil, and later..much later, coffee and doughnuts at the Cafe Demonde. It was a wonderful night. We walked back to the apartment, pausing for a moment in Jackson Square to gaze at the bronze statue of General Andrew Jackson: Perfectly balanced on his rearing horse, without support or buttress. We saw the old Cathedral, its somber crosses stabbing the misty, neon lighted sky, the Cabildo museums looked like gargantuan fortresses, fretted with iron lacework and cannon; and the Mississippi River wound beyond the retaining wall, where ferries and small boats moved between the wharves and the shimmering haze that was Algiers.

Cookie remained in New Orleans until my first night's performance at the Silk and Feather before he returned to Port Gibson. This was the most exciting night of my life. Mr. Vanity financed a wig for me, a four hundred dollar import. It was made of genuine human hair and dyed as white as snow. I bought a white evening gown made of shimmery satin, a scarf of ostrich feathers, white high heeled pumps, and elbow length gloves with irridescent clips at each wrist.

Though the other performers insisted on blue or lavender footlights while they did their acts, I requested amber and red: to bring out the rich tones of my skin, rather than to destroy it as blue would do...that flat, ghostly blue of death. My evening

gown was cut in back to the end of my na
spine, an inch below the crack in my cheeks;
I wore only a jockey strap beneath. I was pr
of my bare back, my smooth shoulders, broad
my neckline and tapering to a tiny waist...
Madeline Carroll back...and I wanted it to sh
to be enhanced by the glowing red lights; unmarr
by strap, cord, or elastic bindings. I stitch
an inflated bra to the inside of my gown,
dressing was relative simple Just to put on
jockey then slip into my slinky gown, snap
irridescent straps at the nape of my neck.
applied no make-up, no body flesh tones, no ma
hose to camouflage hair, since there was no ha

With the ostrich feather piece trailing behin
I entered the stage by way of the elevated doo
way and down the silvery, spiraled stairs; th
to center stage, under the crimson footlight
I sang a song that Bette Davis once sang
a movie about World War II

"They're either too young or too old,
They're either too bold or too grassy-green..."

And that was all:

A shadowy glimpse, a trailing voice, a hint,
suggestion, a promise of mystery

It brought the house down

Men, handsome men, young men, elegantly dres
ed...all but stampeded the stage I had to rus
across what seemed an endless expanse, dash up th
stairs; as men poured over the footlights, cluttere
round the stairs, groping, giving wolf whistle
as I vanished into the darkness I was thrille

to the bone. My every nerve tingled. I was transformed. I completely forgot at that moment that I was male; that I had been a rounder once with the girls, a hood, a punk, a mythological James Dean. I was an actress . . . a woman at last!

Mr. Vanity met me in the dressing room with an arm loaded with long stemmed roses, Cookie waited at the stagedoor with a bright bouquet and Cheka beamed from ear to ear. Everyone congratulated me. Except the other performers, who stood close by; some in female attire, half made-up; others in street clothes which resembled mannish women's fashions; each eyeing me with malicious envy.

"Who's that little ninny from right off the farm?" I overheard one of them say to another, a tall stringy man in a woman's kimono.

"That!" the other one cooed, a hair brush in one limp hand, "Mary Pickford, no doubt, America's little darling!"

"And she (he) uses absolutely no make-up," the other one cried, sashaying it around Mr. Vanity who was bursting with pride. "It's positively untheatrical. Why, even a "real" woman uses cosmetics!"

"Probably never heard of them!" stormed another, a platinum blond with Cleopatra eyes and a Steve Reeves physique.

When I had accepted the flowers and Mr. Vanity's little speech, I began to change into male street attire: my blue jeans, black boots and jacket. One of the performers, who had done a gaudy, cheap strip on the stage, turned to me icily:

"What you trying to do, Mabel, show us girl up?"

"My name's not Mabel!"

"Oh," he cried, as the others gathered round, their skinny hands on unjointed hips, their half-male, half-female attire repulsively ridiculous. "Let me guess! Marilyn Monroe...Jayne Mansfield ...Mamie Van Doren...Ma Kettle!"

There were girlish shrieks of laughter.

"Do you want a fist in the gut?"

"Oh...oh," he half-screamed throwing up both hands. "Don't go butch on us...pleeeese!"

"I think he's cuter out of drag," one of them piped, admiringly.

"You would, sister," chirped another. "You'd swing on anything wearing levis."

I slipped through their gyrating bodies to the rear door.

"Good bye, Greta," one of them cried, blowing me a kiss, then added after a moment's pause... Garbo!"

Cheka and Cookie were waiting for me down at the next corner.

"I wanted to bring the flowers into you," Cookie apologized, after I had thanked him for being so considerate. "But you know the rules. Peasants are not allowed."

"Nor niggers!" aped Cheka, and we all laughed,

We continued down the damp street in silence, past dingy bars where juke-boxes poured out their sad soliliquies; under dark overhead galleries rimmed with lacy grill work, clinging vines and potplants strung from baling wire, weighted with sagging gutter pipes and tendrils of wisteria and Bougainvillea. At the next corner, elbowing our way among a crowd of obvious tourists, we said good night to Cheka and went to my apartment. Through alleyways, under shallow eaves where bright souvenirs hang like flotsom raked up from seas; by windows displaying perfumes, the aroma stagnating my senses as we passed; by shopped, golden lit, the huge glass fronts opening up their precious antique wares: gilt statues, nudes in dark bronze, aged, ancient; huge urns bright with Japanese motifs; glass birds; tapestries hung like battle flags; art, watercolors of antebellum mansions, moss dripping bayous, cajuns, negro shacks, a nude woman splashed out in glaring colors on black velvet, the ferocious face of a snarling tiger; jewelry, dull with age, dust covered, gleaming faintly in the night light. More souvenirs: a stuffed Negro mammy; candy. Flowers and banana leaves leaning over dark iron fences; cafes with food piled in the amber windows, reaking with the smell of onions, grease, mustard, stale beer; and people, night wanderers, paying tribute to their own kind of loneliness; and the stars peeping 'round the cathedral spire, like elf sprites playing hide-and-go-seek; and beautiful women, dark women, with long black hair...and men, handsome young men!

"You know, Cookie," I said excitedly, as we went up the dark winding steps to my apartment, "I'm going to love it here. It's my kind of place...."

We went out on the balcony, leaned on the lacy railings and surveyed the square. The floodlights beamed in on the cathedral, making it look like a setting on a stage; the nervous palms, the music of the fountains, the night prowlers, the smell of water. It was the melancholy enchantment of seas, adventure, old romance.

"I know what you mean," he answered standing very close to me; his hand, warmly, on my forearm. "I hate to go back to Port Gibson. Wish I could stay...here with you forever."

An idea popped into my mind. "Why don't you? There is nothing to keep you in Port Gibson. The sawmills are breaking up for the winter."

"Naw. I can't live off you. It should be the other way around."

"Please," I found myself saying; my wants, my overwhelming desires displaying themselves with words. "You know everything about New Orleans and I know absolutely nothing. I need you. I mean that."

"Is that all you need me for?" he asked, his hands instantly around my waist, pulling me to him eagerly.

"No," I whispered longingly, dreading the lonely nights ahead without him. "I--I need you for a lot of things."

"What things?" he teased. He tickled me on the behind. I thought of Augie, strangely, one long haunting thought, and I said meekly, but honestly: "A guard against my loneliness...my unhappiness."

He laughed an unbelieving laugh.

"You lonely! My god, Dewy. You've got the whole world at your feet. You could get tricked by any man in New Orleans."

"I don't want any man in New Orleans," I blurted out, again thinking of Augie, and seeing him in a tantalizing vision, his devilish eyes, his flirtatious air, his recklessness which never seemed quite tame.

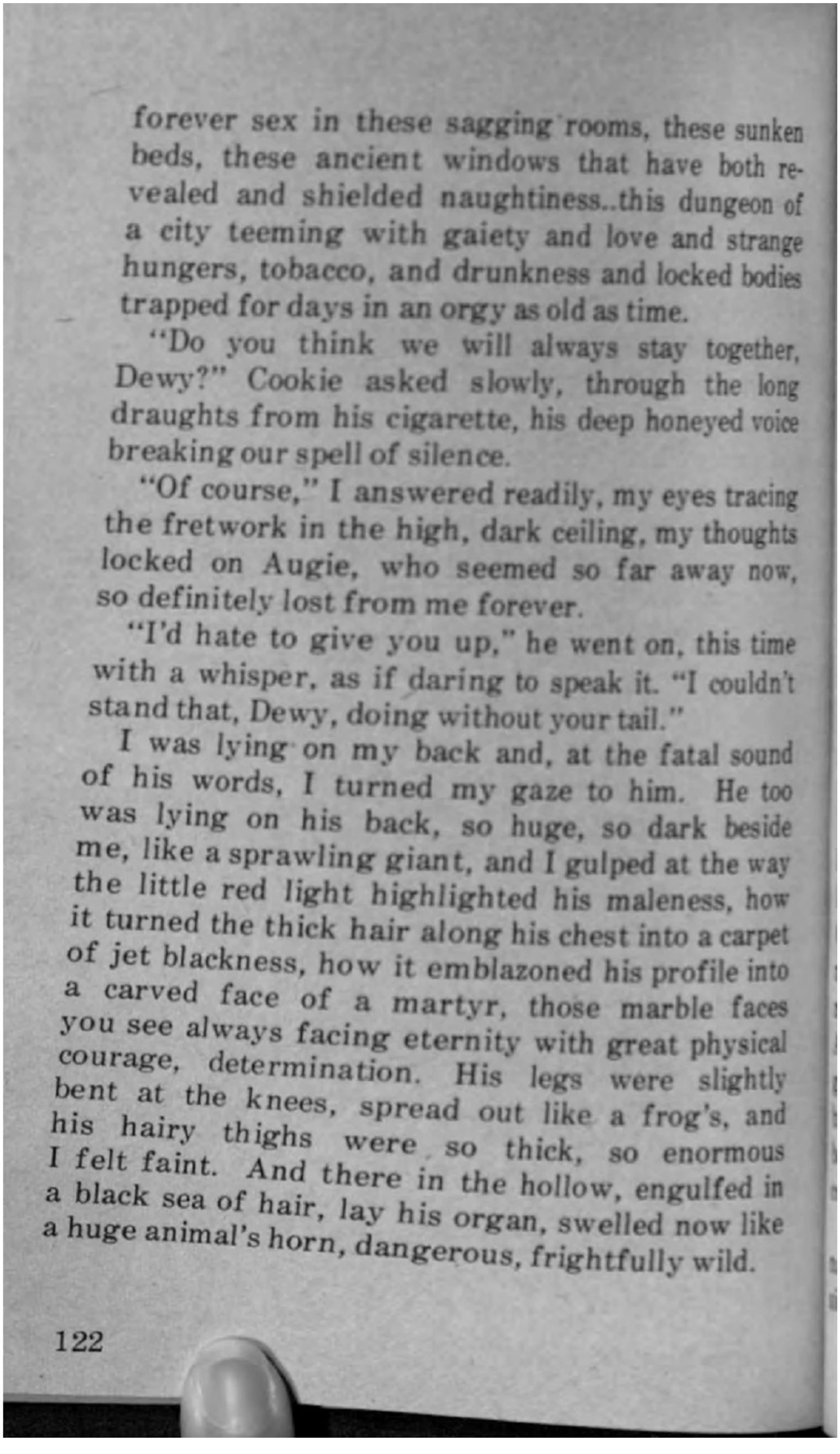
His expression turned quizzical.

"Who do you want?"

I looked up into his blazing eyes, saw their tormented mystery, their deep sexual yearnings, and I whispered softly:

"You, Cookie, I want you."

Then, with our arms around each other's waists, we went into the apartment and, by the light of a single red beaded bed lamp we stripped. We lay down together not saying anything. He smoked a cigarette, blowing the smoke lazily through the room, its blue veil eaten up in the darkness. Outside, the honking of horns, the cries, the river breeze through the palms in Jackson Square stole into the room, invading the darkness, our pensive reverie. Too, came the smells, the peppery fragrance of the asters in the Square, the burning savor from the hot tamale cart with its tiny ringing bell, the fish odors from the river, the ripe scent of beer, old wine, the mould of this building, of dark rich muck from potted plants, of grease, onions and hamburgers, and pecans dipped in brown sugar, and a haunt of urine and the ghost that is



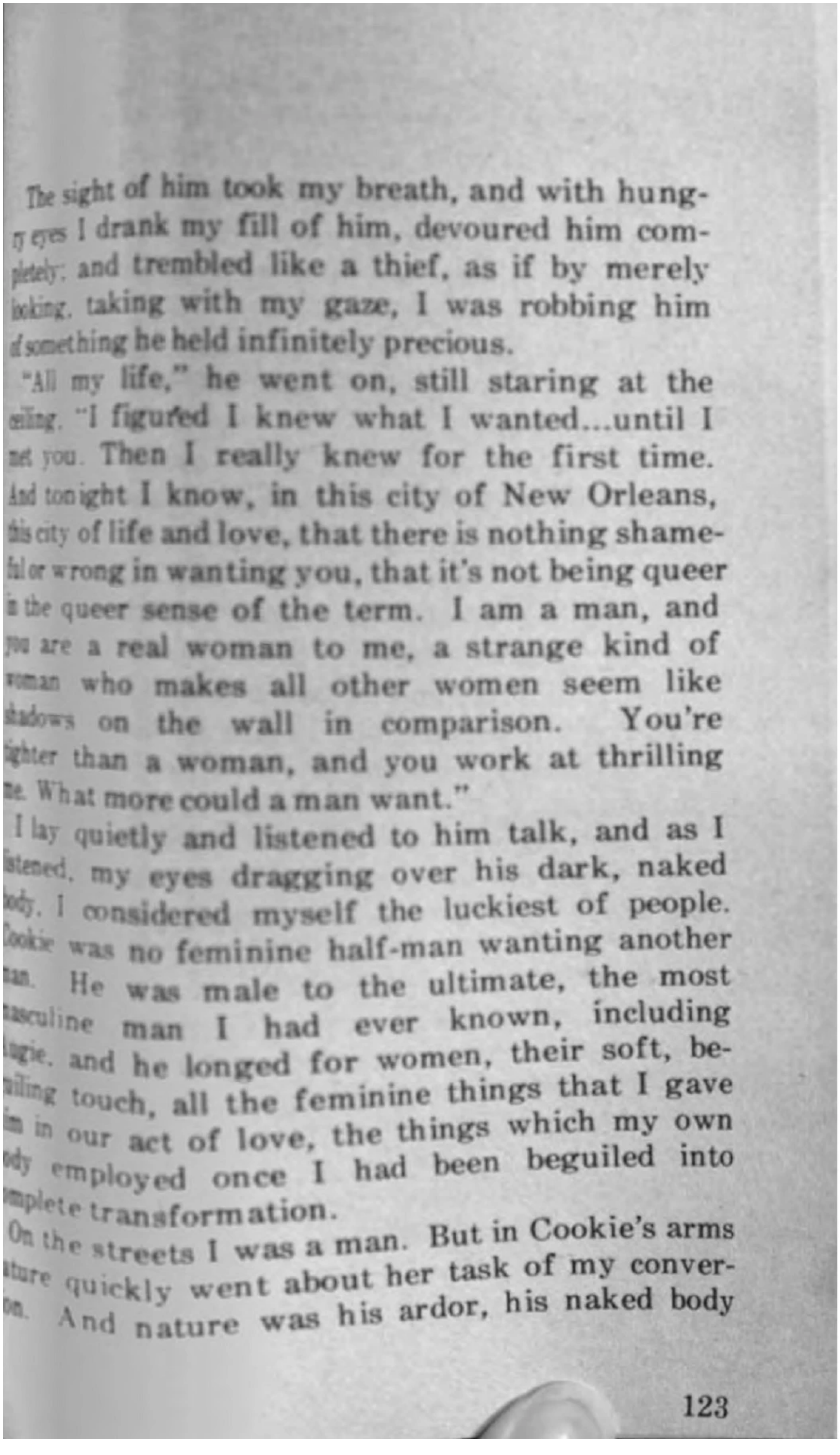
forever sex in these sagging rooms, these sunken beds, these ancient windows that have both revealed and shielded naughtiness..this dungeon of a city teeming with gaiety and love and strange hungers, tobacco, and drunkness and locked bodies trapped for days in an orgy as old as time.

"Do you think we will always stay together, Dewy?" Cookie asked slowly, through the long draughts from his cigarette, his deep honeyed voice breaking our spell of silence.

"Of course," I answered readily, my eyes tracing the fretwork in the high, dark ceiling, my thoughts locked on Augie, who seemed so far away now, so definitely lost from me forever.

"I'd hate to give you up," he went on, this time with a whisper, as if daring to speak it. "I couldn't stand that, Dewy, doing without your tail."

I was lying on my back and, at the fatal sound of his words, I turned my gaze to him. He too was lying on his back, so huge, so dark beside me, like a sprawling giant, and I gulped at the way the little red light highlighted his maleness, how it turned the thick hair along his chest into a carpet of jet blackness, how it emblazoned his profile into a carved face of a martyr, those marble faces you see always facing eternity with great physical courage, determination. His legs were slightly bent at the knees, spread out like a frog's, and his hairy thighs were so thick, so enormous I felt faint. And there in the hollow, engulfed in a black sea of hair, lay his organ, swelled now like a huge animal's horn, dangerous, frightfully wild.



The sight of him took my breath, and with hungry eyes I drank my fill of him, devoured him completely; and trembled like a thief, as if by merely looking, taking with my gaze, I was robbing him of something he held infinitely precious.

"All my life," he went on, still staring at the ceiling, "I figured I knew what I wanted...until I met you. Then I really knew for the first time. And tonight I know, in this city of New Orleans, this city of life and love, that there is nothing shameful or wrong in wanting you, that it's not being queer in the queer sense of the term. I am a man, and you are a real woman to me, a strange kind of woman who makes all other women seem like shadows on the wall in comparison. You're tighter than a woman, and you work at thrilling me. What more could a man want."

I lay quietly and listened to him talk, and as I listened, my eyes dragging over his dark, naked body, I considered myself the luckiest of people. Cookie was no feminine half-man wanting another man. He was male to the ultimate, the most masculine man I had ever known, including Augie, and he longed for women, their soft, beguiling touch, all the feminine things that I gave him in our act of love, the things which my own body employed once I had been beguiled into complete transformation.

On the streets I was a man. But in Cookie's arms nature quickly went about her task of my conversion. And nature was his ardor, his naked body over mine, his sense of coercion.

Looking at him now, longing for him, a
feeling his organ probing the inroads of my
I became rapt, swept out of my true senses
in an instant more I moved toward him wh
the same time, he turns and swept me in
hard, brown arms.

"I love you, Dewy," he muttered, plantin
wide, hot lips maddeningly over mine. "Don'
cut me off, ever!"

"I won't," I answered, as he plunged into me
time with me lying on my back, in the true po
of woman, engulfing him completely, his dark
his chafing, rapturous maleness. Longingly
legs coiled up and around his grating butt
as he stabbed deeper, deeper, with his sw
horn of plenty, and he covered my world, too
utterly, completely, our bodies welding, aban
to our every sense, our every conviction...e
the doing.

"God! You're too much!" he cried, brea
heavily on my upturned face. Then he went lin
my arms, as his opened mouth glided over my fa

CHAPTER TEN

Cookie returned to Port Gibson only long enough to get his personal belongings, and was back at the Pantalba apartments within a week.

Though I was overjoyed at having him with me permanently, even willing to support him if necessary, he loathed the idea of living off someone else and immediately set about looking for work. He sought work along the docks, in the enormous warehouses, and along the French market; anything which required the driving of a truck.

"But why do you have to drive?" I asked him one night while we were having a late snack in the apartment. "There are other jobs, cleaner jobs." The more I knew him the less he seemed the truck driver type; for he was well read to a degree, was suave, debonair, knew how to get around all the important places.

"I just like working around men, real men," he explained. "I can understand men. And I have never been able to understand any woman. Th why I like you so much, Dewy. I can talk to like a man; yet have you as a woman . . . all a needs."

He gave me his winning smile, his cornflo blue eyes sparkling.

We could talk to each other, and on any subj And we never seemed to tire. Too, we had silent intervals, when neither said a word. even on these times we felt an understanding kind of peace between us, flowing back and fo from one to the other; as if our bodies, our min our hearts were keyed in on the other's with c rents of complete harmony the negative and positive ... alternating. It was good to be w Cookie, for he was clean, honest, warm; and m of all because he took everything in stride as thing natural.

Whenever I was in female attire he could teas pet, call me by love names, beguiled, courted, pu sued me. But once I returned to male street we he regarded me in the strictest "butch" fashion, phrase I was to learn from the impersonators the Silk and Feather.

It was reassuring to have a "real" man aroun though I did not go out at pursuing men. In fac I looked on other men as men, like myself, and never imagined or dreamed or hoped for sexual e counters with them. I admired them of cours culled those who were the most handsome, thos I considered the best built, and on occasion I di run across boys my own age when I gave sma wonder about. But Cookie fulfilled my world to utter completeness; and brimming over with this completeness, there was no lack for fulfillment elsewhere. He was all man, immaculate at all times. He never slouched or went unshaven or half-dressed even around the apartment; and he had deep regards for my wants and my privacy. He took me when his desire was urgent, and only then, for I never at any time lured or tried to persuade him into bed; and we kept it at that. Or, I kept it at that, the true secret of holding any man . . . one most women would profit by learning.

Money came easily for me now, plenty of it, and I constantly tried to influence him into staying and with me on what I made. But the idea damaged his pride, his manly ego, and he picked up odd jobs here and there, briefly; always falling back disappointed when they played out or were not meant to be of any permanence. But while they did last, he insisted on showing me New Orleans, which he did on my every spare moment away from the club. The dueling grounds of St. Anthony's Garden, Auduban Park, Delgado Art Museum, Lake Pontchartrain, Spanish Fort on Bayou St. John, the Zoological Gardens, the wax museum, City Park, Chalmette, Westwego, Gretna, Algiers, the National Historical Park and the Grima House and its beautiful courtyard, Congo Square, formerly the gathering place of negro slaves. And after my performance at night, we went to the many famous dining places, the Cafe Des Exiles, Antoine's, Cafe De Refugies, the Playboy, Broussards; we paid tribute to them all.

Often, we discussed his escorting me in fema
attire: the fun of it, the acid test of whether
could pass as a real woman in public in the f
light of day; but presently we didn't dare, with m
job relatively new and Mr. Vanity's strict rules.

But when my four months' trial period was ove
I signed a contract to perform nightly, except
Sundays, for one year's duration; and we were
easy street. My salary was doubled, and I wa
given my own private dressing room. This happene
when one of the "girls" ripped one of my plume
wraps to shreads a few minutes before one of m
performances. She had not liked Mr. Vanity's bil
ing me as "L'Homme Fatale" and has relieved he
rage by trying to destroy my image.

At the sight of it, silently, without a sing
word to anyone, I merely took my black leathe
jacket off its rack, strolled onto stage with it drap
ing about my shoulders, my white satin gow
glowing demurely beneath. At center stage, I slip
ped it off, let it trail, and with a sultry voic
whispered:

"My boy friend's. You should see his status sym
bol."

It caused an instant sensation, much to the env
of the "girls" watching my act from the wings
From that night on, I had my own dressing room

Now with hordes of money rolling in, tips, gifts
checks from fans and admirers, Cookie and
splurged. We bought new clothes, outfits for ever
occasion; jewelry, watches, gold accessories, shoe

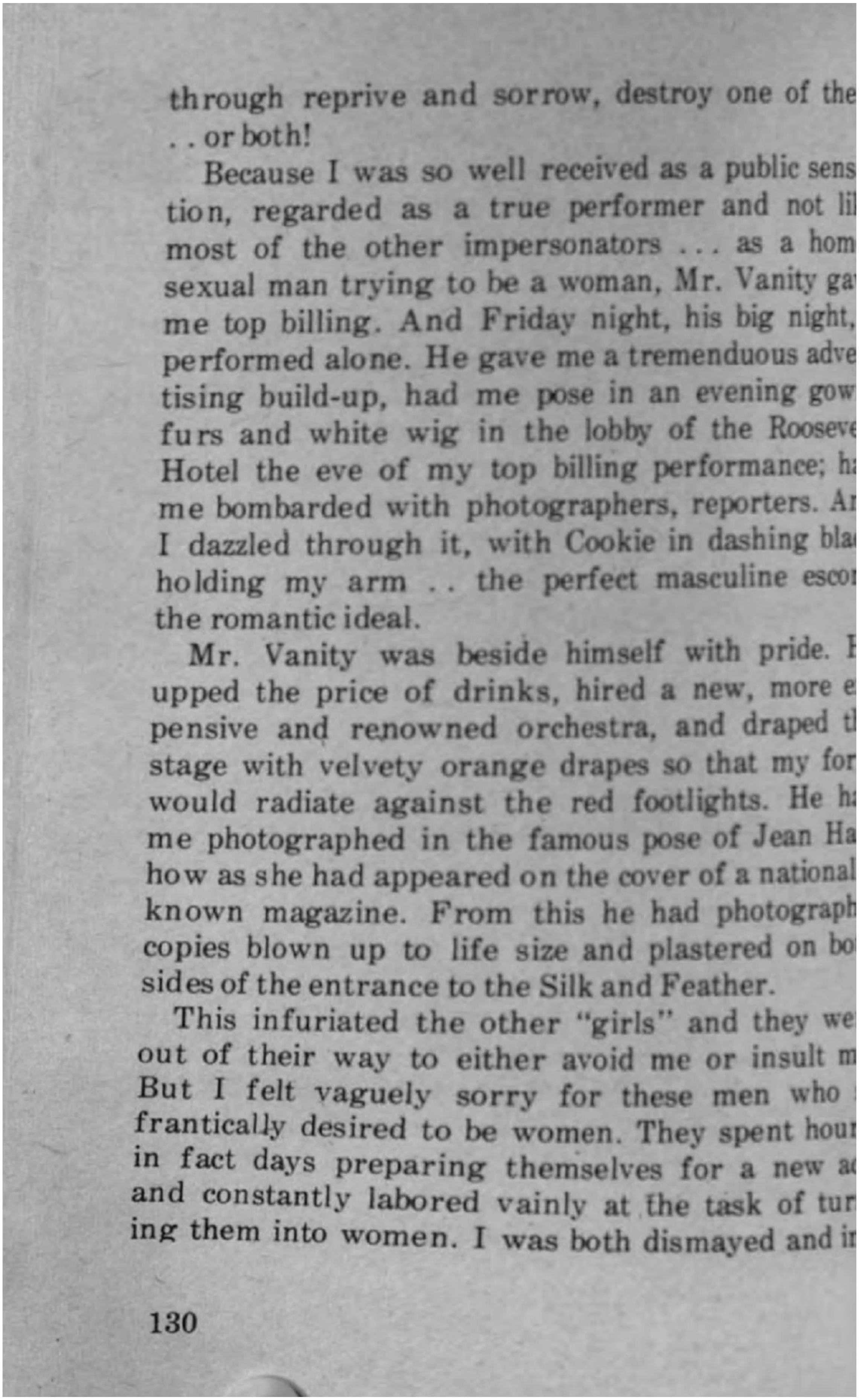
and boots, bathing ensembles, and even a white sports car, in keeping with my new stage image. Too, I bought a lot of extra white male attire, so that I could extend my popularity in male form; and we were soon recognized everywhere we went: as we scooted about town in my shiny white Corvette, decked out in one of my white outfits, a white plastic count-down helmet on my head, my eyes shaded by white rimmed sun visors, my dark ravishingly handsome escort beside me.

On different occasions, I was written up in the Local Times Picayune as the Schizophrenic Idol . . the beauty of suffering; and later, when I had top billing . . . as The Star Goddess.

As one writer declared . . . . .

"Dewy Bow, in our midst and yet not among us, bears witness today of a star's real greatness . . the true star. A survivor of the Twilight of the Gods, her (his) mystery and glamour permit us to measure the evaluation which has taken place: the new, modern man who can be anything he desires. Like a sign of mourning, as though to protect himself from the corruptions of the world and time alike, he hides his features beneath graceful gowns, furs and shimmering plumes. And it is she . . Dewy Bow . . her immortal, divine face which our memory sees gleaming beneath that veil."

This sterling article, which I clipped and framed, lent me new fortitude. I became dangerously bold, a brazen image I was later to regret, later to mourn, later to battle; as if I had two seperate bodies, two seperate forms, two seperates hearts, and must;



through reprive and sorrow, destroy one of the
. . or both!

Because I was so well received as a public sens
tion, regarded as a true performer and not lil
most of the other impersonators . . . as a hom
sexual man trying to be a woman, Mr. Vanity ga
me top billing. And Friday night, his big night,
performed alone. He gave me a tremenduous adve
tising build-up, had me pose in an evening gow
furs and white wig in the lobby of the Roosev
Hotel the eve of my top billing performance; ha
me bombarded with photographers, reporters. Ar
I dazzled through it, with Cookie in dashing bla
holding my arm . . the perfect masculine esco
the romantic ideal.

Mr. Vanity was beside himself with pride. H
upped the price of drinks, hired a new, more e
pensive and renowned orchestra, and draped t
stage with velvety orange drapes so that my for
would radiate against the red footlights. He ha
me photographed in the famous pose of Jean Ha
how as she had appeared on the cover of a national
known magazine. From this he had photograph
copies blown up to life size and plastered on bo
sides of the entrance to the Silk and Feather.

This infuriated the other "girls" and they we
out of their way to either avoid me or insult m
But I felt vaguely sorry for these men who
frantically desired to be women. They spent hour
in fact days preparing themselves for a new a
and constantly labored vainly at the task of tur
ing them into women. I was both dismayed and i

patient with their rituals of shaving their body hair (and some of them were as hairy as Cookie) taping their crotches, lifting the "breasts" with [illegible] tape, plucking their eyebrows; trying every aid for the removal of face whiskers, every conceivable make-up; dying their hair; soaking their hands in butter-milk to soften them, dabbing them with cold cream and encasing them in gloves for days at a time; squeezing their enormous feet into pumps three sizes too small; pinching their fatty waistlines with cumbersome corsets, with and jockeys, with all manner of home-made articles to slim them down and flatten their loins. Their dressing room, with its walls weighted with gaudy costumes, was constantly littered with opened boxes of talcum, false eye-lashes, mascara, eyebrow pencils, rouge, lipstick, creams, pancake make-up, jewelry made of cheap junk, bracelets which they strung to each elbow, gloves, garters, mesh hose with runners from being forced up over shaven legs, corsets lying on chairs and bunks, kimonas, shoes, plumed headgear, eye shades, opened purses with glass beads hanging out, veil thin handkerchiefs, paint stained kleenex tissues, glitter, sequins.

I never applied face make-up per se, but relied on my own natural, healthy coloring with the addition of dark eye make-up and a silvery rose lipstick. I simply combed, or brushed my wig down straight, and always wore elbow length gloves so that I would not have to allow my nails to grow long or resort to painting them. I strived for the clean, healthy look, the ultimate woman, the spiritual woman; and I saw no reason for over-doing what I already naturally possessed with a coating of cheap cosmetics. Women all over the world, those endowed with athletic good health, bronzed complexions, compact forms, never resort to make-up, for it never serves them as an aid to their earthy beauty. Many college girls have this look, the clean-scrubbed, out of doors look; and these were my models. They, I believe, are the true women, not these painted up factorized faces: compensating for imperfections, and ordering their features according to a fashion of beauty which can be Hellenic, Oriental, exotic, ingenue, romantic, piquant, feline: whatever the women desires to copy. This is a mask actually, adherent, and the face is dissolved, destroyed, within it. Those women who will never own a healthy, natural beauty, try to raise daily artificial beauty to that level but fail miserably. And those garish, effiminate men who must employ a mask created out of make up become nothing more than a poor parody of woman, a man-woman who is basically artificial at best.

Out of their hatred, their scorn, their obvious and highly vocal envy, they pinned me with names; attempting vainly to break me down. They dubbed me with names like Sarah Bernhardt, in mockery of my acting ability; Schizophrenic Hood, because I could switch so easily, so cleverly from one sex to the other, and back again in a matter of minutes; Star Goddess, out of the archetype of what they longed to become themselves.

I ignored them completely, their "bitchy" attitudes, their shrieking disapprovals, their glaring, accusing eyes, the envy which showed so plainly but which they so determinedly attempted to hide. I was the star. So I acted the part. I lived it. No one could put me down, cheapen my act, destroy my image, degrade me by openly suggesting that I was "queer."

No one except Mama. But she had always berated me, had hated me actually; and for no other reason than my vague resemblance to my father: the man whom she had loved once, and who had left her. I bought gifts constantly and sent them to my sisters, to Aunt Nanny, and to my mother. Every time I entered or left my apartment I always paused long enough to buy some colorful postcards to send them; especially to my aunt, for she loved them dearly.

I wrote to them regularly, related to them my success, the money I was making, my new car and clothes, and they kept be abreast of current happenings in Vicksburg. They never mentioned Augie, and I never asked. Yet, sometimes, especially when I would get a little homesick and nostalgic about home, my mind would automatically conjure up thoughts of him; and I wondered if he had given up his search for me, if he still cared, if he still wanted me sexually . . or, had he found someone else?

Pains of jealousy still persisted to haunt me when I remembered these things, and at times I brooded;

despite my popularity, my stage career, my h
home life with Cookie.

I received only one letter in my life from
mother, and it went something like this:

What brand of kotex do you use? I would li
send you some for your birthday.

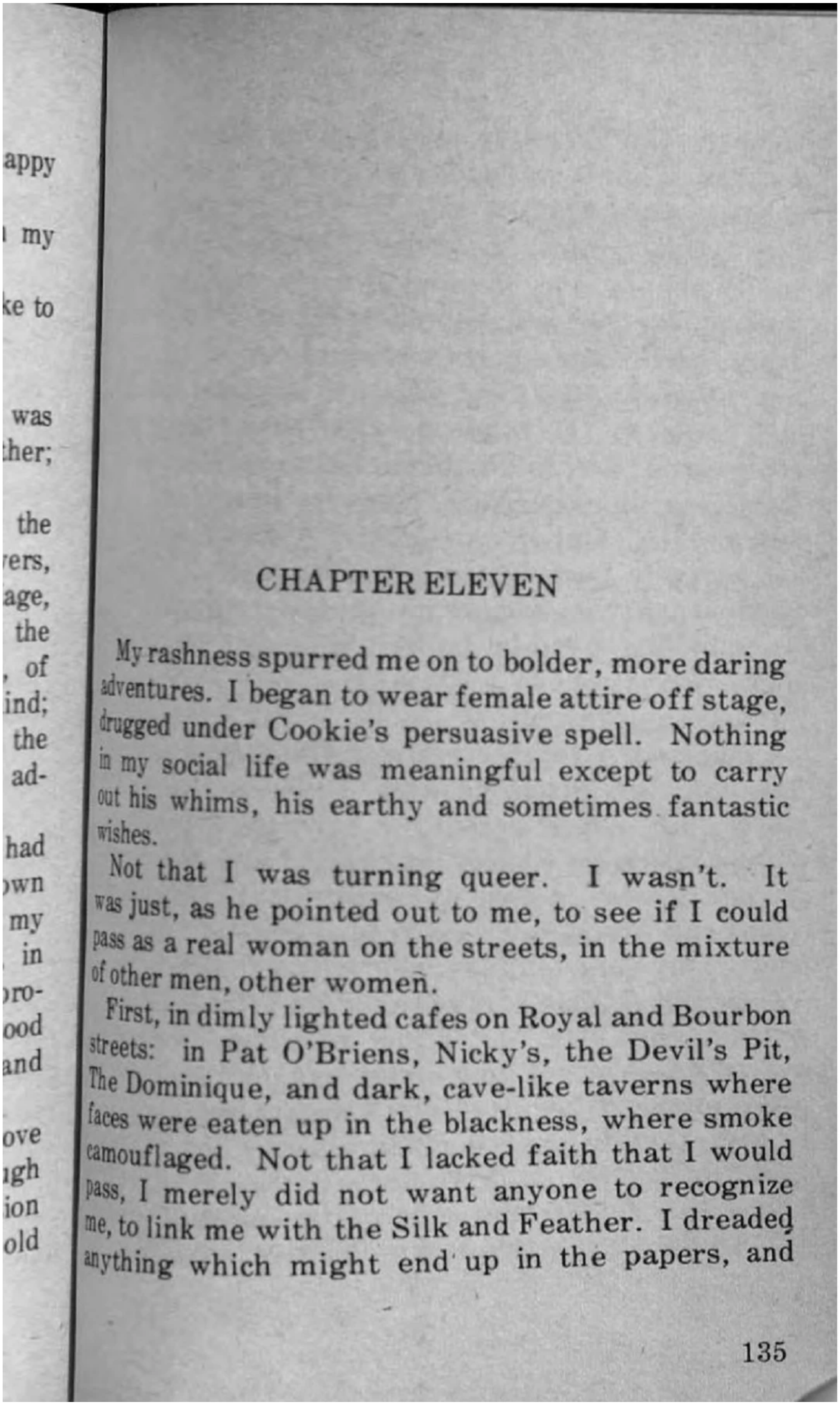
Your Mother . . . I think!

It hurt, but I refused to let it bother me. It
her way, I reasoned, to get even with my fat
by hurting, humiliating me.

But riding high on my fame, engulfed in
adoration of my numerous fans, their flow
their little love notes, their proposals of marri
their cheery faces greeting me each night at
stage door, I pushed the thoughts of home
Mama, of Augie into the dark crevice of my m
refused to bring them out and view them in
light of my present glory. I had fame. I had
mirers, and I had Cookie.

Cheka, too, was still with me, though he
drifted socially with boys and girls of his
race. But I believe he remained loyal to me as
body servant, and took pride in serving me,
trailing my bright comet's tail. There was a p
tective quality within him for me, as if he st
between me and Augie somehow, between me a
the brutality of the rest of the world.

He was freer now in New Orleans, free to m
in a wider, more diverse circle of friends; thou
there were still racial restrictions, racial tens
in this deeply Southern city whose ties to the
world, the old South, still clung persistently.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

My rashness spurred me on to bolder, more daring adventures. I began to wear female attire off stage, drugged under Cookie's persuasive spell. Nothing in my social life was meaningful except to carry out his whims, his earthy and sometimes fantastic wishes.

Not that I was turning queer. I wasn't. It was just, as he pointed out to me, to see if I could pass as a real woman on the streets, in the mixture of other men, other women.

First, in dimly lighted cafes on Royal and Bourbon streets: in Pat O'Briens, Nicky's, the Devil's Pit, The Dominique, and dark, cave-like taverns where faces were eaten up in the blackness, where smoke camouflaged. Not that I lacked faith that I would pass, I merely did not want anyone to recognize me, to link me with the Silk and Feather. I dreaded anything which might end up in the papers, and

come to Mr. Vanity's rapt attention. Then it
Sunday dinner at Antoine's, a stroll with Co
in the square, a blazing ride down Canal street in
little white coupe, then to the theaters: Loe
the Orpheum, the Saenger, the Joy, and the li
theater for the stage production of "West S
Story," where the performance of one of my f
compelled that I attend. He had seen my act
had come to the stage door to congratulate
afterwards. So I felt that I should reciprocate.

One evening we really tested my image, and
own daring..dangerous daring. A motion pict
had recently been filmed in the Baton Rouge ar
The feature stars had been invited to the Governo
mansion for a public interview, and it was op
house to everyone.

Cookie and I went.

I selected a bright yellow taffeta, pink-oran
flop hat, and matching high heeled pumps. M
gloves, too, were orange, and I dabbed my li
with a touch of melon lipstick. I did not we
my white wig, in fear of recognition. Instead,
curled my black hair into french curls directly
front of my ears.

I trembled like a thief as Cookie and I we
through the long, glittering receiving line; b
walked up on cloud nine when I shook hands wi
two of my most favorite Hollywood stars.

Later, Cookie and I laughed about it over a be
in Rip's Huddle, a drink or two in the Roma
Room, the Paree; and gloried in our victoriou
triumph during our ride back to New Orleans.

I related this exciting outing to a fan of mine one sunny afternoon in Brussard's resturant in the Vieux Carre. I saw him sitting alone about the same time he saw me, and he came over and joined me at my table.

I had met him before, and thought him a very intelligent and perceptive individual. He wrote poetry, had been in a number of plays in the Little Theatre, and had appeared in minor roles in several movies.

"How do you mean?" I asked, completely baffled. "I figured it would be the other way around."

"Because you are, in my opinion, the true actor," he went on to explain: "You know your role by heart and you play it to the ultimate as all actors Shangri-La from which flows the elixir of immortality. Had you been one of those other actress-actors at the Silk and Feather you would have given yourself away, for you would not be acting, but being yourself."

"I understand more clearly now," I said, noticing his periwinkle blue eyes reflecting the tiny powder puff clouds in the sky, the way his darkly blond hair lay smooth and shiny over his brow, his almost boyish features: the marked characteristic face of those in the arts.

"That is the one and only reason I **admire you,** your ability," he continued, taking a pen out of his blazer pocket and scribbling on the menu while he talked. "You are male, ultimately male, not a femine trying to be a female. The way I look at them. They are definitely not a man, and most certainly can never be a woman, so they are neither, actually. But you, Dewy. You cut a sharp line between the two. The moment you walk off the stage you should leave your image behind, an image that doesn't exist, which you do.. so far. And you should always do that...as all actors who are serious about their profession should. In you I see definitely two people, Dewy the male, and Dewy Bow the female. I hope you will always be wise enough to keep the two separated."

"I will remember that," I assured him, realizing that he had given sound advice.

"If you cannot separate the two," he added further, rising from the table and leaning over it, his weight balanced on his thumbs and index fingers, "then together, they will only lead to tragedy, much unhappiness, and violence."

I nodded thanking him silently.

"I hate to rush off," he whispered, his voice low, plaintive, without a trace of southern accent. "But I am due at a rehearsal at the Little Theater out on St. Peter Street."

He waved and as he hurried across the flagstone courtyard I glanced at his scribbling. I picked up the menu and read:

Imagine pain
So intense, so searing
As to exhort the brain
To neglect all save hearing
Itself cry out.
So do I ache for the sounds of you.
The bell tolls

So somber, so forlorn
Gone!--the warm fold
Gone!--the lamb fresh shorn
And hopelessly lost.
A brilliant lightning flash: the icy darkness.

I remained quiet for a moment, puzzling over his little poem, the advice he had given. He was almost a stranger to me coming out of the depths of this rotting Southern city, this pit of antiquity; and I knew that he was right. My aunt had mentioned violence. I seemed to sense it, smell it in the fragrant air: the foreboding of it. Yet, I did not realize that it would come so soon . . . in fact this very evening, this awesome, never to be forgotten night.

Even as I fussed over my clothes much later in the day, as night came on, I was haunted by it, the silent sound of it, the whispering of it; the cold chills like a bony hand tapping on my shoulder.

Cookie and Cheka had gone to the Algiers dry-docks to look at the ships being repaired and I was to drive down to the Bienville St. wharf to meet them later. Cookie and I were to go aboard the "President" for an evening's dancing and drinking. I was undecided on what to wear. Finally, I slipped into my white satin gown with the irridescent straps, white gloves and white wig. I was their Sarah Bernhardt, their femme fatale, their La Divine, their schizophrenic idol, their Star Goddess; and with daring caprice this night, intoxicated by my fame, my looks, my taken-for-granted happiness, I craved

to flaunt my image in "real" life...or was it m
craving, my aspiration to be myself?

The heedings of Aunt Nanny, the impossible rul
of Mr. Vanity, the hushed softness of a stranger
advice receded to the back of my mind as I applie
the finishing touched to my L'Homme Fatale ide
image.

I went down the dark stairs humming an old tu
my mother used to hum on Saturday mornin
as she busied herself preparing the Sea She
for Saturday night customers: that merry hu
of expectancy, of the air of joy, the dawning
happiness. I held my long silvery skirt up to keep
from becoming soiled on the grimy steps; my radi
ant, languid body was soaked with fragrant per
fume, colognes: fresh, icy, chilled, the very smel
setting my every nerve, my every pore to tingling.

I reached my little white sports car parked belo
on Chartres Street, and gasped as I opened th
door.

A dark figure sat inside.

It was Augie!

The breath left my lungs. My naked knees wer
like water. "Where did you come from?" I blurte
out, my voice trembling.

"Surprised, eh . . . Miss Bow?" He let out a burl
laugh.

The same old Augie!

He slid over the bucket seat to the one on the
right; threw back both arms, letting them come
to rest outstretched on the back of the seats.

"Get in, Smash," he said, grinning apishly. "I want to see how you do it, in them whore clothes!"

Nervously I obeyed, slid in gracefully, and started the ignition.

"Wow" he cried, "What a transformation! You sure are cool, man. Or must I say girl now? You've flipped me, and good. I never thought old hard-tail Dewy would turn out to be a fruit!"

"I'm no fruit!" I cried back defensively, as I eased the car down Chartres Street and south onto St. Peter, heading it for the wharves.

He studied me with blazing eyes, embarrassing me, degrading me with that look.

"What you decked out in them bitch duds for, if you aren't a fruit?"

"I don't have to explain..not to you anyway."

"Don't blow your cool, man . . . I mean woman. Aren't you glad to see me? Been a long time, Dewy."

"How did you recognize me?" I questioned, ignoring his, and I was getting more nervous by the second. My memory lashed out and dragged my last afternoon with him into the present.

"I wouldn't have, Smash," he answered readily. "If them fruity sissies over at that Silk and Feather club hadn't told me where you lived; and I hadn't seen all them giant jobs of you plastered out in front. Boy! When I goggled them, and said to myself: Augie...that's your old pal Dewy...turned into a friggin bitch!"

Suddenly, for the first time, I felt the shame of it, the full impact of the thing: hearing him put it into words.

"How did you know I was in New Orleans?"

"That fruitcake mammy of yours," he sai this time with a touch of seriousness: Nobod tells me nothing. Everybody flakes out on m your sisters, your Aunt, even your mother. Then. then one morning she's in her Mickey Mous joint drunk, and bawling like a gone ape, mar And she gets out all these flashy postcards an passes them around to all them winos and plastered pukes; and I get hold of one of them an cast my peepers on it and I say to myself: so littl Dewy bugged out on me..fer good." H looked at me then, his eyes dark pools of mystery "But you didn't bug out really, did you, Smash Aren't you glad to see your lover?"

"Cut it out!"

"I'm not burned, Dewy. Honest . . . straight skinny. I don't care about the motorcycle. It was ou anyway. I blew my cool at first, man, you tossing i into the river; but when I tuned in on you I knew you were jealous. You were burned like fire, man It got my ugly stick all worked up, turned on man; and I just had to find you. You really fixe up for me, in them glad rags. Boy! Who'd thought that as many times as I beamed in on you naked, and never gave one whip about putting the rod to you, that you'd turn out to look like this. a slick chick, man. What a goose I've been, letting all that fine joy meat slip me by."

He reached over, letting his hand slide up my leg. I took his hand and shoved it away.

"A lady now..eh?"

I didn't answer. I wanted to ask him how long he was going to remain in New Orleans, but I dared not. It would be an obvious hint for him to leave, and I did not care to arouse his anger. I guided the car over the ramp in front of Jax's brewery, along the tracks, down the Toulouse Street dock toward Bienville Wharf where I was to meet Cookie and Cheka. I cut off the motor. For a tense, undecided moment of silence, as if waiting for the other to speak, we sat staring at the dark river mirroring the dazzling lights of Algiers.

"You make a purty girl, Smash," he said at last, leaning closer to me: his daring, reckless face near mine. "I've missed you. And I still love you. I still want you. I ain't never gonna give up, ever."

"Augie," I murmured, trying to explain everything, "I've changed. I'm not the Dewy you once knew, went to school with . . . not anymore."

"I like you better now, Smash," he said, childlike.

"No . . . I've done things," I said my voice a tremor; and before I knew it I was telling him everything: my stay at the sawmill camp and my dancing there, Cookie and what he meant to me; breaking clean with, "I'll buy you a new motorcycle. I've got money now. Then we will be even."

"I don't want a set of wheels," he murmured, his head slightly bowed, his eyes, hurt, naked with pain. "I want you, Dewy. Besides, it ain't that easy."

My heart leaped to my throat. I detected something ominous in his words,. in his low guttural voice.

"What do you mean?"

"That lover of yours. That makes all the difference, Dewy. "His eyes were like fiery coals on mine, piercing, animal-savage in this uncertain light.

"You had no call to flake out on me, to turn your tail up to someone else...makes a heap of difference now."

"I don't want any trouble," I managed to utter, watching painfully as the little churning ferry slipped into the wharf. "I told you I'd get you another motor, then you can go home in style. Besides, Cookie and Cheka will be here in a minute. They--they're on that ferry."

"You still wet-nursing that black fruit?"

I couldn't answer. I was too terrified to think, to move. All I could see was Cookie's dark handsome face above me, his protection; and I couldn't bear to see anything happen to him. But I knew Cookie, and I knew Augie even better.

Augie got out of the car and slammed the door as the ferry locked with the wharf. Numbly I climbed out, and went around to where he stood, his body gleaming in the glow of the wharf arc lights.

I saw Cookie and Cheka descend from the ferry, take the little wooden walk up to where we stood; and terror and heartache filled me with a fear too awesome to gauge.

"Is that them?" Augie asked.

"Yes," I noded.

At that, he wheeled, got into my car, started the motor. Then, as quickly, he leaped out, giving it a shove. It went down the wharf, over the wide rough planks, over the end, and into the river. There was a thundering splash; and walls of water rose spraying the wharf, the ferry, and descending people.

My God! I thought standing there like a stone statue, reliving that stricken day when I had shoved his wheels into the river. Knowing again the brutality of man against man

"Now we are even," he said hoarsely, his body between me and the shimmering lights of Algiers: a dark, groping silhouette.

I said to him blindly, tears dimming my eyes, "Augie ... did you ... did you care ... so much?"

He looked back at me, his form still dark, uncertain, a phantom shape out of my boyhood. The crowd, along with Cookie and Cheka, was rushing up, closing in, and I heard him mutter, hurt, heartbroken: "I loved you, Dewy. I really loved you!"

Instantly, not by the sound of his voice or what he had said, I felt that love, a moving primitive thing: an emotion so overwhelmingly beautiful it shut out all else. It blinded me. It covered my world. It mastered me.

Strangely, at this crucial moment I wanted to go to him, fall into his waiting, hungry arms; but it was already too late.

Like a man gone hopelessly mad, Cookie reached out, grabbed Augie by the collar, shaking him like a cat shakes a kitten. "What the hell, man?" I heard Cookie gasp, as they faced each other there on the wharf, under the arc lights; like actors in

some kind of cruel, groping melodrama. Cl
rushed to me; and his terror was so acute I c
hear the gasping labor of his breath, the wild
frantic beat of his heart.

"We're done for!" he cried.

Fists flew out, striking with dull thuds. T
groping bodies rolled interlocked like two be
in the act of passion; unlocked, then rolled toge
on the roughly hewn planks.

The crowd, mostly women and children, out r
ning for cover; others stood watching helples
paralyzed by the spectacle. They were like vultu
awaiting a kill, and I sensed this as I watched th
staring at the two bodies writhing on the plar
There were sudden shrieks and groans, and a c
cried out piteously echoing my terror:
sickened repulsion at the sight of Cookie; at Aug
Augie, the boy out of my childhood dreams.
all but went faint; their powerful masculin
locked in a savagry I could not comprehend, play
out the desperate, violent roles of men..the r
of Aunt Nanny's prophecy, of the strang
warning, of Mr. Vanity's ultimatium.

Someone cried: "They gonna kill each othe

And that cry ran through me like gushing blo

Then, with Cheka's gulping moans, his alm
girlish shrieks, calling my attention to every mo
every sign: a knife gleamed, reflecting the wat
front lights.

The crowd saw it almost at once, and wild cr
went up. Then there were animal groans, moa
gutteral sounds pouring from punctured bow

from arteries drained like siphons. One body rolled over, went limp. The other lay sprawled, twitching in agony.

It all but unhinged my mind. A nightmare happening, out of this promised night of jubilation. Clinging to the sobbing Cheka, I moved toward them like a sleepless sleepwalker; bent down, peered into one of the dark . . . dark faces.

It was Cookie. His eyes were closed. His face was pale, almost luminous. Someone whispered: "He is dead!" I clutched at my heart, numbed now; too numb to think, to grieve, even to pain.

I looked over at Augie. He was trying to rise. I leaped to his side dragging my gown in the desperation of my hurry; laid his dark head in my lap. Cheka bent close and took his hand, sobbing pitifully; as the maddening screaming of sirens punctuated the darkness, the whirling blue beams of police cars sliced the night sky, an ambulance shrieked to a halt a few feet away.

"Am I hurt bad?" Augie muttered weakly. His eyes, haunting, glared up at me, pleading, frantic.

"No, baby," I heard myself whisper, patting him on the cheek, wiping away my tears. "You'll get well, you'll get well."

"We'll fix you up like new," Cheka comforted, examining Augie's side, his coppery hands fidgeting.

"Just a stab in the side. Nothin' but a pin prick."

There was a blinding flash of lights as wild cameras clicked; the shuffling of feet, yells, men in white moving thoughtfully, uniformed mer cops . . . cops! pushing back the moving mob ing to maintain order.

A policeman bent over me, as two hospital dents lifted Augie's limp body and placed h a stretcher, and he asked with wh think was genuine concern:

"Who is he, lady? Do you know?"

I looked up at him, shocked.

Lady!

"He's he's my husband," I answered q not looking at him. I watched Augie as the i placed him in the ambulance and closed the door

The policeman took hold of my arm.

"You'll have to come with me, lady, for in gation."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Sitting in Mr. Vanity's plush office, awaiting his return, I glanced over the morning paper with a shuddering of my heart. There, sprawled across the front page in bold, boxcar letters was the headline: Hood Murdered over Rumble about Local Actor. And directly below: a hazy picture of me in misty white, leaning demurely over Augie. It was too much, and I dared not read further; for the experience alone was tragic enough, without the retelling.

I was dressed as masculine as I could be; a black Ratner suit worsted with silk, a Prince Ferrari shirt, and matador tie; I was dressed purposely to meet Mr. Vanity. For I would need all the weapons I could conjure up in order to match swords with him, since I had broken every rule in his book, with several additions of my own. He finally came in, swaggering under his ponderous weight; cool in a pale ivory colored suit of silky weave, pastel green shirt with a shade darke tie. A green silk handkerchief flounced from hi coat front pocket, like a flowering plant; whic gave him a rakish look, like a flowering plant which gave him a rakish look, like a gangster ou of the early thirties.

"Well, my, but you're punctual," he remarked coming around his mammoth desk and floppin down ungracefully. "Been reading any newspaper lately?"

I flinched, for this had an unmerciful sting; bu I tried to keep a calm face: a face that I kne was marked with grief over Cookie's untimel death and the wounds of Augie.

"Well, Dewy, you've got us in a mess," he said wringing his hands together is a fat, bejewelle ball. "A real scandalous mess!"

"It wouldn't have happened at all," I cried back in deathless defense, "if it hadn't been for thos bitchy faggots in the show."

"What did they have to do with it?"

"They told Augie where I lived. Those clawin cats will do anything to put me down."

"It would have happened anyway, eventually, he grunted. "That's why I have my rules I've been in show business long enough to know you're playing with fire when you hire queer as performers."

"I'm not queer!" I stated bluntly.

"Didn't say you were," he mused, attempting muffled giggle. "But you been carrying on lik one: dressing like a woman on the streets, going to the most prominent places in town, boldly making it like a real woman; steeping yourself in a wild world of violence which ended in hoods fighting it out over you in the streets like cur dogs over a bitch. It happens every time, Dewy. In this queer world you can't flounce your behind around and not expect men, real men, to lock horns sometimes. It's worse than if you were a real women for they could find another woman easily enough. Every bed in New Orleans has a woman in it, and most of them for the taking. But you are unique, Dewy, among your type; and men are going to naturally fight over you. That is why I imposed rules on you. You are not like these other screaming hens who put on acts here at the Silk and Feather. Did you know that some of my patrons actually think that you are two people? They think I've hired a boy and girl who resemble one another: brother and sister maybe, or identical twins. And the boy pretends to be you on the streets and the girl on the stage. A fine arrangement we had didn't we? But you had to go and louse it up."

"I won't ever do it again," I murmured, feeling sick all over at the mess I'd made of things.

"Oh, yes you will."

"No, Mr. Vanity, not ever. I'm going to be a man from now on, dress like a man, live like a man. I'm finished with this women stuff."

He glared across the desk at me. "What do you mean, finished?"

"I'm quitting."

He jumped like a stuck pig. "Oh no you're not!" And he shook a plump finger at me. "Let me remind you of one thing, Mr. Smart Airs. You're under contract to me for a year; and you're not going to break it..understand?"

I nodded meekly, feeling that I had trapped myself in something all my cunning couldn't wriggle me out of.

"I've caused one very dear friend to be killed and another to be wounded. It is the bitter end for me. I've hit rock bottom in this stinking fairy world. I want out..completely."

He squirmed in his squeaky chair; took out a cigar and lit it, blowing billows of white smoke across the room. "Now don't go off the deep end," he said apologetically. "I didn't mean to be so rough on you. We'll work out something. No sense in you folding your tents, without giving this some serious thought. I know you're torn emotionally with Cookie gone, your other . . . er friend cut up; but life isn't over for you. It's not like you were going to get hung." He picked up the newspaper, studied it for a brief moment. "You know, this coulda been a lot worse." He flipped one hand in a bold sweep across the front page. "The headlines coulda read a lot of other ways, like: Murder over Local Homosexual, or: Hoods Scrabble Over Female Impersonator. Could have been lots worse; could have put this place out of business if I hadn't stepped in, shushed up the reporters, paid your fine, got your friend Augie out of jail. But, and he shrugged, "time is the great healer. In the show biz world people forget quickly, thank God. Many acting reputations have been built on the shaky foundations of scandal. Let's hope we both profit by this. This article in the paper, this picture of you bending over your logical lover may just draw them in like flies to a honey pot." He glanced at his watch, an enormous glittering James Bond affair, completely covering his fat wrist. "You'll be on in an hour, just time enough for you to dress."

I rose, a little shaky, realizing painfully that I would have to face those nightmare faces in the audience: perhaps their boos, their damnation on my doom. I thought of Augie, and my yearning heart, my desure for him now; now that I had awakened to his deep affection for me, his willingness to sacrifice so much...even at the risk of his own life...for his rights to me. I had to ask. "How...how is Augie?"

He smiled, and looked all the more like a rosy cheeked cherub. "If I could keep him from talking about you long enough, I might find out. That boy loves you outa his mixed-up mind!"

Relief, like God's approval of my entrance into Heaven, swept over me.

"But why don't you ask him for yourself?" he said warmly. "He's sitting in the audience, waiting for you to go on."

"In the audience!" I gasped, overwhelmed, bursting with sudden happiness. We both laughed, a nervous, unleashed laugh.

I started for the door, but he made a motion with his hand.

"I want you to remember one thing, Dewy, the most important thing you can ever remember if you are to remain an actor; this kind of actor. The homosexual world is the cruelest world of all. A world flanked on all sides by violence; a stinking whirlpool of murder, rape, rolling, robbery, blackmail, degeneracy; and beyond its ugly borders there are few to come to its aid. The police, the law, the courts: none of these are allies. They too are enemies. So my advice to you is . . . create whatever image you most desire on the stage; but once the footlights are dimmed, forget that image until you go on stage again. Slice the two as neatly as your intelligence will allow . . . then you'll go far in this anarchistic world. Your star can ascend to the loftiest heights, its afterglow so brilliant it could light the universe."

An hour later I stood in the shadowy wings, heartbroken, faint of nerve and will; grounded as if a heavy stone tugged behind me. Then, as if out of another time, another place, the music began; there was a roll of drums, the amber lights wenton, and I made my way out onto center stage.

Then, as if magically transformed, I instinctively came to life, the only real thing in this hazy phantom world . . . the true woman . . . Femme Fatale, La Divine, Star Goddess: my own dear imaginary caprice.

My eyes wandered over the dark audience, searching, scanning the thousands of pairs of eyes.

I saw Cheka in the far isle, debonair in his wine and gold uniform. Then I saw Augie. One arm was in a sling, and with the other he waved at me. His face so savagely beautiful now, inflamed with the love he and I would come to share together tonight after the show; at last at long last. I couldn't fight him any longer. Like he once said: We'd be aces together; and I thought then: Maybe we've always loved one another, but didn't know it . . . in high school even, long before either knew about such things; a love and an admiration borne out of some dark secretive embryo we could not understand; something that only nature knows, and does not divulge her information.

"Hello World!" I cried to my audience, lifting an arm in herald. The crowd roared in ovation upon ovation as if my lifted hand were a sparkling wand conjuring magic: the phantom of Dewy Bow. Then, as the orchestra keyed me in, and with a soft, beguiling voice, I began my number:

"Let me . . . . " I saw Augie's glowing face staring up at me. I cried a sob of happiness. "Let me . . . Let me entertain you . . . . "

THE END

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